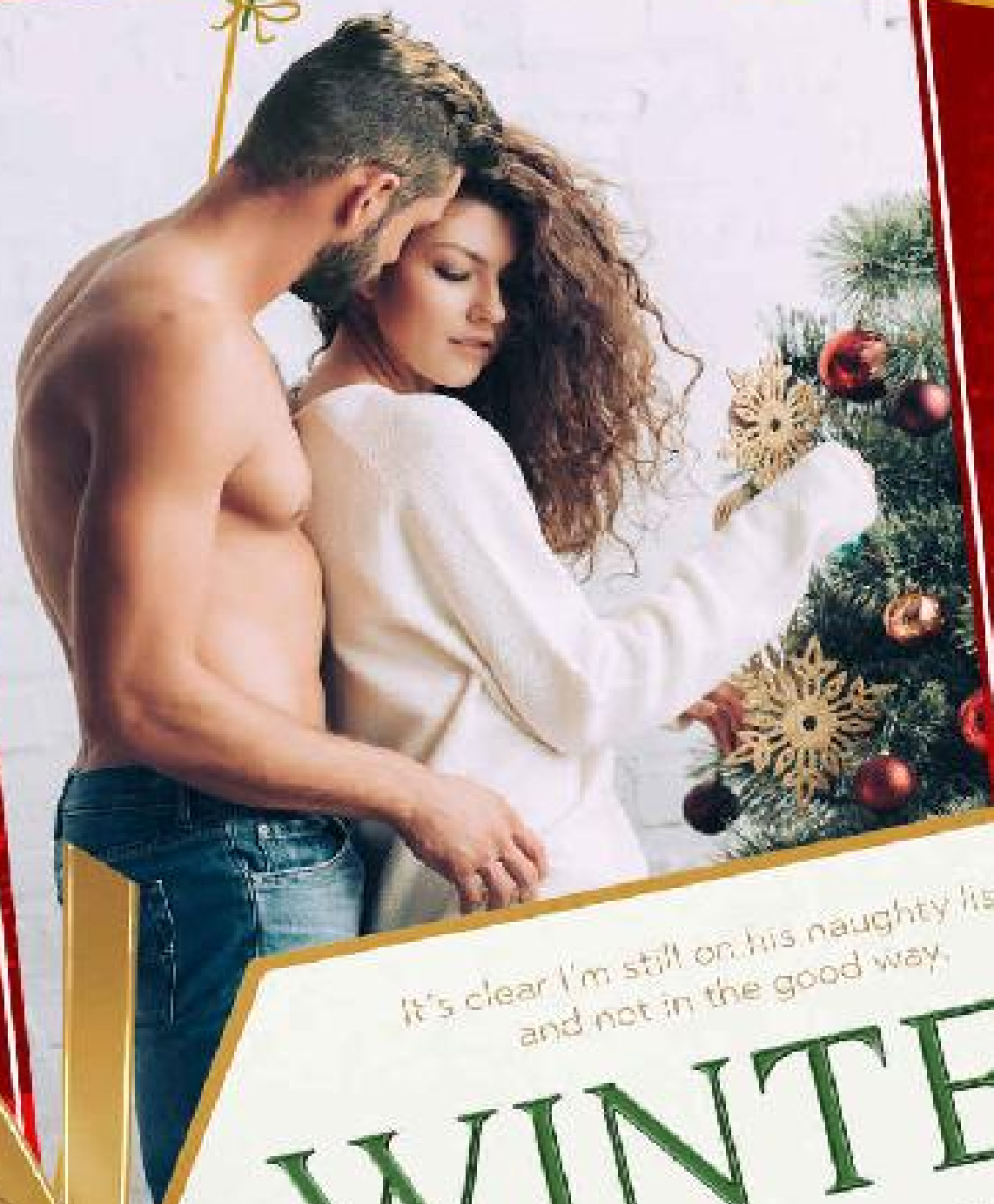


CARRIE AARONS



*It's clear I'm still on his naughty list...  
and not in the good way.*

WINTER  
BREAKUP

# **WINTER BREAK UP**

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# CARRIE AARONS

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*For my grandfather; an elderly Jewish man who thankfully never read any of my books despite his insistence that he should. He loved a Christmas romance movie more than anyone I knew.*

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# 1

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MERCER

Coming home for Christmas break, I figured I'd be greeted with a warm welcome. What I never planned on was having the nicest ass I've ever glimpsed in my life shoved directly in my face as I strolled back into town.

The two perfect round globes greet me and my distracted cock with a blunt hello, and I can't help but trail my eyes down the long legs that lead up to them. Even if this spectacular backside is clothed in tight, waterproof snow pants, which I know for a fact have long johns beneath them because I was lucky enough to peel them off of her once upon a time.

Emily Palmer makes a grunting noise, one close to the type of moan that haunts my dreams, as she tries once again, unsuccessfully, to deliver the final blow to the trunk of the tree about to tumble onto her head.

The saw in her hand shakes a little as if she's been holding and cutting with it for so long that her muscles are exhausted. The snow I stomped boot prints in on the way out here is at least six to eight inches, and it's all over the knees and elbows of her snowsuit.

It's early days here at Palmer Tree Farm, but just from observing the number of trees that have been cut down and presumably sold already, I'd say we're in for a busy season.

Emily and her brother, Charlie, have been working the farm since their parents allowed them to handle the saws independently. From that time, I naturally took a job here

every holiday season, too, so that I could work with my best friend and the girl I've always crushed on. Year after year, we'd spend the snowy months goofing off between the rows of spruces while hauling plump, fragrant-scented trees back to the register on the four-wheeler.

That all changed three and a half years ago when my heart was smashed to bits, and I haven't worked a Christmas here since. Not until today, when Charlie begged me to come back in for what would be our last holiday together before the real world comes calling.

Another frustrated whistle of air through Emily's teeth has me focusing again, and I need to get it together before I make my presence known. I didn't think I'd have to face her this soon, but when her mother asked me to come out and grab one of the purchased trees on a four-wheeler, I didn't realize she meant that her daughter was the one cutting it down.

Or, well, struggling to by all accounts. She throws down the saw in annoyance, which I see as my opening. Can't risk being hacked in half by an ex-girlfriend who can't deliver someone's merry and bright.

"Looks like you've got it all figured out."

My first line, the only words I've spoken to her in nearly three years, are asshole ones, but part of me will never forget that she put the final nail in our coffin.

The branches of the Douglas fir sway as she whirls around, still careful to keep hold of the inner trunk so it doesn't completely topple.

And now, I'm face-to-face with the girl who thought I wasn't worth a long-distance relationship. Mind you, that long distance was only an hour and a half, but I guess when you're an eighteen-year-old, fresh off graduation and headed to college, everything in this world seems a bit bigger.

Hazel eyes, flecked with green and gold that remind me of a forest at sunset, flash a look of indignity and shock at me as Emily realizes who is standing in front of her. I watch as embarrassment—a quick blush of it—races over her high



cheekbones. Full peach lips, a tinge blue from the cold, settle into a grimace that only highlights the beauty mark just above the left side of her mouth. The tiny scar on her jaw, the result of stitches from a sledding accident on a hill not too far from here, flexes as it appears she's gritting her molars together.

Her hair, nearly inky black with a tinge of auburn red when the sun hits it just right, peeks out from beneath her beige cold weather hat. I can't tell if those loose waves are still as long as the last time I saw her, what with the layers of clothes swamping her, but the pom-pom atop her head makes her look cute despite the scowl she wears.

Emily Palmer, my best friend's little sister, the high school flame who dumped me the summer before college, stares at me in all her angry, gorgeous glory, and I can't help but be rooted to the spot. The weight of her gaze has always rendered me helpless; there were times when we were dating when she'd only have to look at me, and I'd fall at her feet like some pathetic Romeo.

This is the one girl, now a woman, who I will never be able to get out of my head. We all have that one regret, the one who got away, the one who we thought would be everything, and it didn't work out. She's mine.

"Aren't you going to help me?"

The huffy, frustrated tone of her voice only deepens my smirk, and it's nice to know she's not going to be timid or sympathetic, even though she blew me off all those years ago.

"I mean, you're doing a hell of a job of it all by yourself. Don't mind me, I'll just wait to lug it up here once you're done." Leaning back, my ass hits the hood of the four-wheeler as I cross my arms over my chest arrogantly.

Or cross them as best as I can. After spending most of my winters and summers in Florida, I'm not used to wearing cold-weather clothing just yet. Sure, I've been back to my hometown of Queenwood, New Jersey, for short visits here and there, but the schedule of a college athlete doesn't permit for a lot of family time. Especially when I'm training for the

big leagues in the off-season or taking meetings with professional trainers to spread the word about my dedication.

The way her eyes trace over my stance, though, it's clear she likes what she sees. That only makes my extremely confident ass more confident, and that's typically lacking when it comes to this girl.

"Mercer, stop fucking around." An errant snowflake lands on her cheek, and I have to stop my hand from unconsciously reaching out to brush it off.

"Ah, so she remembers my name. I thought maybe you'd forgotten it in all the fun you were having away at college." It's not like I haven't stalked her social media.

Secretly, I hope she's done the same to me. Has she watched my soccer matches? Has she kept up with my free agency prospects in the sports news? Has she seen some of the speculation about my dating life from those stupid online publications that care so seriously about who I'm dating?

They say there is no better revenge than an ex who did the dumping, being jealous of your current love life. As I think about the prospect of Emily poring over Internet searches about me, I can attest that's true.

"Shut up and help me," she demands.

My steps crunch the snow beneath our feet as I stalk toward her, the heat between us making me sweat beneath this getup. It's been years since I've been alone with her, yet it's like no time has passed at all. She's still the girl I had to pretend to be annoyed by because she was my best friend's sister until I didn't want to pretend anymore, and we got so serious, so fast, that it knocked both of us for a loop. I'm still the guy who wanted to take her along for my future, the boy who hasn't been able to come home partly because I can't stand to see if she's moved on.

The history between us is all over her face, like she expected me to be here and still hadn't prepared herself. Honestly, aside from the ambush when she turned around,

Emily didn't look all that surprised to see me. A lightbulb goes off in my head.

“Did you know I was going to be working here?” The question comes out with a puff of air that nearly touches her lips, we're standing so close now.

Emily shrugs, her gaze dropping to the saw in her gloved hand. “My dad might have mentioned something.”

Ah, so they gave her a heads-up and hadn't given me one. Not that I needed it; it's a foregone conclusion that Emily will be working on her family's tree farm. But part of me now thinks that her mother asked me to come out here so we could get our awkward first meeting out of the way with no one around.

Without my gaze leaving hers, I reach out to grab the saw from her hand. Even with gloves covering both of our fingers, the brush of my fabric against hers sends sparks down my spine. How the hell, after three and a half years, does Emily Palmer still garner this kind of reaction from me?

So many questions are on the tip of my tongue, from how she's doing now to where she wants to end up after graduation. It's not like I get much information about her; after our breakup, Emily became a no-go topic between Charlie and me. If we wanted to sustain our friendship, it was better for both of us not to discuss his sister.

Now that I have her in front of me, I want to dig beneath the surface and get to know her like I had. But I'm just here for winter break, home for a month between semesters, just like she is. Nothing can come of this, both for my heart and because I'm pretty sure Emily is no longer interested in me. It's been years, after all, and it's not farfetched to believe one of us has pretty much forgotten the other.

No matter how much that stings.

Taking the saw from her hand, I walk to the tree she's been attempting to cut down for a customer. Getting a clean cut, preserving as many needles as possible, picking the perfect

tree for each family; there's a science to working on a tree farm. At this moment, I feel I'm about to fall right back into it.

With one harsh, smooth pull of the blade across the wood, I free the tree from its trunk and neatly toss it on the four-wheeler. With every fiber of my being, I hope I made that look impressively cool and effortless.

"Is it smart for you to be moving your knee that much?"

At her words, my heart drops. For so many reasons, the least of which is that she knows about my injury and cares enough to ask if I'm okay doing this physical labor. Emotion gathers in my throat, forming a knot, and I try to breathe through my nose. I try not to see the footage I've seen a thousand times of me going down on that soccer field and the entire crowd going quiet. I try not to feel the searing pain of tendons tearing, surgery, recovery, and physical therapy.

I try to bottle it all up, smooth it over, and put on the unaffected charm I've used throughout the last year.

"Are you just upset that I could do that in six seconds with a bum leg while you couldn't accomplish it with two good ones?"

Something flickers in her eyes, almost like sadness, and I immediately want to know why. But before I can ask about it, she's turning, and I can only glimpse her side profile. She's shut herself off from me.

"Not like I did ninety percent of the job for you or anything. Show off," Emily mutters as she shakes her head.

My smirk is the only acknowledgment of her annoyance. "Do you want a ride back or would holding on to me be too unbearable for you?"

"I'll walk, thanks." Showing me her backside, the one I've thought about way too much over the years, Emily begins to walk off toward the large barn that doubles as a checkout and ornament/wreath shop.

"Don't be dumb, Em. It's freezing out here already, and we've got a whole day ahead of us. Hop on. Or sit in front if it suits you. Don't worry, I'll keep my hands to myself."

I can't help razzing her; it was our love language back in the day. Taunting and teasing led to us falling in love, and borrowing that old tactic feels natural.

Her shoulders rise and fall while she faces away from me, and it looks like she's trying to take a calming breath.

Turning to look over her shoulder, those hazel eyes meet mine again. "No, thank you, Mercer. Really, it was nice of you to offer. I don't want to do this while you're here. Charlie is happy to be working with you this Christmas, and my parents are so appreciative of the extra hands. We can be civil, even friendly. No need to do this with each other. So thanks, but I'm going to walk. I like being out here on the farm again, and who knows what next year will bring."

The small smile that flits over her lips does a weird, twisting thing to my heart, and I hate that she's being so mature about this. It was easier mere moments ago when she was annoyed at my flippant comment. Because kind Emily is the one who guts me, this version of her that is sweet and sincere, who doesn't want to rehash our breakup so that her brother can get what he wants for the holiday season, it will always pull me toward her like a magnet.

Even if she's the one who ended things, even if I'm the one who could still be pissed off with her considering the roles we assumed, I find I'm nothing but deeply attracted to her at this moment. Not even in the physical sense, but on a level where I want to read her thoughts and observe her motives.

It seems that the girl I once loved has grown up while we were apart. And it's not a shock in the least that I want to see more of her. That I want to have whatever parts of herself she'll open up to me.

I'm in so much damn trouble.

What was supposed to be a quick month and some change at home, a holiday respite to spend with hometown family and friends, has just gotten that much more complicated.

**H**e looks too damn good in a parka.

Better than anyone should be legally allowed to look in snow-covered jeans and a massive winter coat. Because it's basically like he's naked, flexing all those muscles dragging that tree through the powder, when really, he's covered head to toe.

Or maybe that's just my imagination deploying any number of the fantasies I dream up about Mercer Russell when I'm deep in sleep and can't prevent myself from thinking about him. It's been three and a half years since I saw the boy whose heart I broke before leaving for college, and he's grown into a man in that time.

Of course, I know that from the sleuthing I've done online. But seeing his tall, lean, and honed body in person is a whole different ballgame than the pictures that get posted of him on social media. And I do mean *of* him because, of course, Mercer is way too cool to keep up his own social feeds. Almost makes him cockier that he doesn't have a bone in his body that cares about impressing his Internet friends, and the guy always did have a big head to begin with.

Pair those collegiate athlete, soon-to-be professional athlete, muscles with those sapphire eyes, golden-blond curls, and the singular dimple in his right cheek, and yeah, Mercer Russell is pretty lethal to a woman's nether regions.

As he hefts the Douglas fir that the Corkin family requested, I can't help but observe that whatever time he's

spending in the gym, or more likely with an expert trainer, is working. Mercer has been a phenom on the soccer field ever since I can remember; from the time we were little, it was like he needed to have that black and white ball surgically removed from his foot he was kicking it around so much.

When my older brother, Charlie, told me that Mercer was being scouted for the league and considered for a roster spot on our country's national team, it didn't surprise me in the least. What I didn't count on was him coming home for our last winter break before the final semester of our individual senior years.

See, Charlie, Mercer, and I all grew up together. Mercer's family lives around the block from mine in our suburban New Jersey town, and we had an easy childhood. Playdates at the park, ice cream, swim lessons in the summer, homecoming games, and dances in the fall, with all the traditional childhood moments and milestones.

The boys called me Charlie's little sister because, technically, I am. But only by one month short of a year. I was the oops baby. Or, as my mom likes to say, "the best surprise gift we never knew we wanted." FYI, that doesn't make it sound that much better. But yes, my mom and dad got pregnant with me right after Charlie was born, thus sentencing us to a life of Irish twindom and being in the same academic grade.

We'd been the three musketeers until Mercer and I fell in love. It was a tale as old as time, the cliché romance between a sister and her brother's best friend. Well, up until the point where I broke up with the boy I was head over heels in love with because I didn't think we'd be able to get through college without destroying each other's hearts. I just preemptively avoided all that.

"Oh, good, you two found each other." Mom sends me a sly smile as she looks between my brother's best friend and me.

I'm going to kill this woman. I mean, I won't because she birthed me and is one of the best people I know, not to

mention I crave her chicken soup too much to lose it, but the murderous twinges she's evoking don't go unnoticed.

My mom sent Mercer out here to help me on purpose, forcing our first meeting rather than letting it happen naturally.

“And not a moment too soon, isn't that right, Em?” The asshole winks at me, that dimple shining like a cocky sexual innuendo.

The way he uses that nickname should not make my stomach flutter with butterflies the way it is right now.

“I was fine,” I mumble, even though I was about to collapse from the sheer effort I had to exert on that tree trunk.

Not working out for two months will do that to you, I suppose, but this holiday season will whip my ass back into shape. The burn of my muscles and cold air in my lungs is a welcome pain as opposed to the mental anguish I've been recovering from lately.

“But you were better when I showed up.” Mercer says this under his breath so only I can hear, and a sneaking suspicion tells me he's not just referring to back there in between the rows of trees. “So, can I make a clean cut for you all and then tie this one up in a bow?”

The way he charms customers is something I forgot, seeing as he hasn't worked on our family tree farm since we broke up. There was about a week two years ago when he was around, but I'd been on a school ski trip with some college friends, and I think my absence was the reason he helped my parents out. Other than that, we haven't seen each other since that summer after high school graduation, and it's disorienting to fall into a conversation with him now. As if no time has passed, and there is no more bad blood about the way we separated.

The truth is, the more—and more—I think about how things ended between Mercer and more, the more I regret them. At first, I thought the freedom was what I wanted. What we both needed. Mercer is going to be a soccer superstar, he's destined for greatness. The way I loved him was far too great



for me to suffer a heartbreak over. I wouldn't have survived it. That's why I cut things off before he could.

I saw how girls looked at him back then, like he was a gorgeous meal ticket. I knew what I would have to put up with, the gossip that would come with a long-distance relationship. And it's not that I'm insecure—I feel quite confident about my body and my looks and always have—it's just that the thought of maintaining our connection while living separate lives sounded exhausting. I was young, unsure of what I wanted out of the world, and it felt like the smart move to break up.

We were a high school relationship, a teenage love that felt all-consuming in the moment.

At least that's what I told myself back then and for years after. That it only felt so real and perfect because we had zero responsibilities, and it was a puppy love situation. But with each boy I met and each relationship I got into and subsequently ended, I realized I was chasing something I'd already had.

If I dig deep enough, I'll have to admit a truth I've been burying for a long time: breaking up with Mercer Russell was probably the worst decision of my life, and it seems like he still holds a ton of animosity over it.

Seeing as how he's never come back, or at least not places where we would bump into each other. And his greeting out there on the farm was nothing close to cordial. It's why I tried to throw out that *détente*, to soften his attitude toward me since we are clearly going to be working together this winter.

My damn brother always has to throw me curveballs in life. He used to say he was making up for the fact that I showed up not too long after he did and stole his spotlight, and part of me wonders if he was half-joking about that.

In reality, I have no reason to be annoyed with Mercer. Aside from his aggravatingly gorgeous face, which always looks so smug, I can barely escape it when I go online or turn on the TV these days. But he's never done anything wrong to me. I was the one who messed us up. Being pissed at myself

and taking it out on him isn't fair, so I need to take some deep breaths and be rational.

The sound of a Christmas tree *thunking* down on the slab of plywood set atop two table horses grabs my attention. I watch as Mercer easily throws the thing around, ropes it up, gives the bottom a fresh cut, and then offers to tie it to the Corkin's roof. Actively trying to keep my jaw off the floor, I attempt not to stare as he does what takes me nearly half an hour to do in all of three minutes. And when they try to hand him a tip, the jerk puts it in the community jar.

God, why does he get to look like that and also act like a saint?

"Dude, you trying to show me up on the first day of the season? Calm down." Charlie walks up to Mercer, and they do that whole bro slap handshake thing before giggling like schoolgirls.

"We going to keep count again this year? Remember the one winter I whooped your ass? Oh wait, that was every winter." Mercer whistles through his teeth.

God, the guy is still so arrogant. Why is that so damn attractive? I pretend to busy myself with the lockbox of cash and change so that I don't have to interact with these two idiots.

"You're out of practice, man. I'm going to school you this year. My record while you were away was a hundred and ten trees. *Epic*. Bet you can't cut down anywhere close to that amount this winter break," my brother brags, and I come this close to quipping about the seven stitches he had to get in his thumb when he almost cut it off two years ago.

"You're so on. Loser has to buy the winner a steak dinner at Alpine's." Mercer's deep voice runs over my body, and my heart aches.

Seeing him, hearing him this close, brings back so many memories. Especially at Christmas time, when I'm already feeling sappy and lonely and nostalgic.

“If you two get injured trying to do this, I’ll be so upset,” Mom speaks up, and I know she worries more about her boys than she does me.

I’m the smart one, the responsible one. I’m the sister who never steps off the path and will keep everyone else in line. Except for four months ago, when I didn’t, and it ended with my injuries teaching me a lesson.

“More than that, I’ll be sorely disappointed if you’re not focusing all your efforts on finding the perfect tree on the property. We’ve won the Queenwood Christmas Tree-Off five years in a row at this point, and I will not lose to the McGibbons or the Kasterniks. I’m counting on you three to make us proud and pick the best tree on the lot.”

Every Christmas, the town has its annual tree lighting. And so, every Christmas, the tree farms of Queenwood each present their most beautiful, most majestic tree for possible selection to be the “town tree.” The rivalry isn’t too laced with jealousy and competition—Mom and Dad are practically best friends with the McGibbons.

Queenwood has three tree farms that all become completely mobbed from Black Friday to December twenty-fourth. Aside from our farm, the McGibbons and Kasterniks each own land with rows and rows of pines. It’s an honor to be the farm whose tree is lit, seen by all the residents, fawned over, etc. Plus, having our name on the town tree generates a little more business for next year since the townsfolk want to buy from the farm with the best-looking trees.

Mom nods her head tersely like she means business. Mercer’s eyebrow lifts in a way that makes it known he’s accepting the challenge, and I flash back to five years prior when we were happily making out among the trees while pretending to search for a competition winner.

Mom has become a little intense about it in the past five years, but it has been good for business, so I guess I can’t blame her.

“Oh, we’ll win that tree-off, don’t even worry.” I wink at mom. “You know Dad always find the perfect one.”

If Dad has a sixth sense for anything, it's selecting the perfect Christmas tree. Some might not say that's a marketable skill, but maybe that's because their family never owned a tree farm.

"I'm going to be the one to find it this year." Charlie sticks his tongue out at me.

"But not if you injure yourselves in another silly competition. Eyes on the prize, kids." Mom wiggles her eyebrows.

"We've got a nurse on staff now, no worries, Ma." Charlie comes over and slings his arm around my shoulders, all but pulling me into a noogie.

"Get off me." I struggle and duck out of his hold, setting my winter hat back on straight. "And I'm not a nurse yet, not even licensed. I have taken no oath to heal or mend your moronic asses, so don't go getting any ideas."

"You're really doing it." Mercer's voice interrupts our brother-sister faux feud moment, and I look over to see him genuinely beaming at me.

My gloved hand rubs behind my neck. "Uh, yeah. I've always said I would."

Being a nurse has been my dream since our first health class in fourth grade. Learning about the body, what ails it and makes it tick, and how to care for people on a medical and emotional level, I knew it was my calling long before I applied for college. But when I did, I made sure to seek out the best nursing program in the country, the one I wanted the most, and ended up getting in. I left for Washington, DC, the August after high school graduation, and haven't regretted my decision since.

I know it'll be a different story once I truly get into real-life nursing work and situations, that I'm not jaded through the experience, but so far, I've loved all my clinicals, even on my hard days, so ...

"You did, didn't you? That's really awesome, Em." Mercer's compliment almost has rays of sunshine lighting up

my chest, and I immediately feel dumb that his praise means so much to me.

So, I do what I usually do: turn someone's compliment into a sarcastic response rather than accepting it.

“Don't think that means I'll bandage you two idiots up if you get hurt while competing for a prize either of you could easily buy on your next year's salaries.”

While Mercer is destined for sports greatness, my brother is a tech genius. He's already been offered a job from the company he interned with, a massive name in the space, and plans to move to Silicon Valley two weeks after graduation.

Charlie flips me the bird before jogging off to help another family, and Mom is wrangled by a couple looking for an ornament to commemorate their first baby being born right before the holiday.

Which only leaves Mercer and me. I'm sweating beneath my long johns, and it has nothing to do with the exertion I used to get the tree down. It does, however, have everything to do with my ex-boyfriend smirking at me.

“If I didn't know any better, I'd say you've been keeping tabs on me, Em.” His gaze lands on my lips, and I can't help how my heart slams into my chest.

We never lacked chemistry, that's for sure, and it clearly hasn't dissipated in our time apart.

“It's pretty hard not to. Aside from the fact that my brother is your best friend, it's not like your name isn't in the mouth of every sports commentator these days.” The tone I use isn't even snarky, it's factual.

Mercer looks like he wants to reach out, his hand pausing mid-air, and then I feel a snowflake land somewhere on my cheek. Rather than touching me, though, his limb drops back to his side.

“True.” He rubs his jaw in a way that makes my thighs clench.

Caught in the moment, a beat or more passes before I break the connection of our eyes. I can do this. I can be professional. Nice. I can work with him for this month and a half and not keep harping on my greatest mistake staring me in the face.

“I’ve got to get back to work. It was ... good to see you, Mercer.”

There, that was nice enough. Right?

Damn, I’m never going to make it through the merry season this year.

“**Y**ou cut your hair.”

The thought pops out before I can stop it and has Emily turning around with a fright.

“Jeez, I didn’t know anyone was back here.” Her hand flies to her chest, blood-red nail polish capping all of her fingers.

Stomping out of my boots and pulling off my hat and gloves, I take a seat in one of the folding chairs in this little enclosed space. Emily’s parents had this small employee room built onto the back of the barn for the seasonal workers to take breaks in, and it’s serving its purpose right now. Working an eight-hour day in the cold, doing hard manual labor, with sap and pine needles all over you, yeah, you need a break sometimes. We come back here to eat lunch, warm up, goof off, or just slack when we feel like it.

Sure, I could go home since my day is over. I’ve already said goodbye to Mrs. P and handed her my tips for the day. Even though I came back to work on the tree farm, I told her I wouldn’t take her money. Not an hourly wage or the tips. I’m doing this for the nostalgia, for the last-ditch effort to soak up home before my life gets chaotic. As a student-athlete, and with my national team affiliations, I usually get clothes, meals, and travel for free. Sure, there isn’t much leftover, and I don’t come from a family as well-off as the Palmers, but they don’t need to pay me this holiday season. Working with Charlie is payment enough.

So yes, I could have headed home. But part of me feels this magnetic draw to seek Emily out. To have one more conversation with her, no matter how much it will burn me. I've gone years without talking to her, and having her right in front of me is the best kind of torture.

"Sorry, just wanted to transform from an icicle back into a real person before heading home." I give her a small smile.

It's tougher to muster the sass and charm from this morning when my body aches like it does now. The sun is setting early on the cold horizon, something I haven't been used to in years since moving to Florida for college. Plus, my knee feels like it's about to collapse, and I know I overdid it with how much I pushed myself today.

"Mom made a vat of her hot chocolate for the first day." Emily points to the small kitchenette in the break room space.

My mouth waters. "Damn, your mom makes the best hot chocolate. She buys those big, square—"

"Marshmallows? Yep. Two different kinds, too; vanilla bean and peppermint."

"God, that sounds delicious." I drop my head back as I rub my hands together, relishing the feeling returning to my fingertips.

"You're not used to the cold anymore, huh? It's not even January, you remember how frigid it gets."

I haven't spent much of my winters in New Jersey since college started, what with winter training down in Miami, so I guess she's right.

"I guess not. My toes feel like popsicles." A chuckle works its way out of my throat.

Walking to stand next to Emily at the counter, we work in tandem, fixing our cups of cocoa. She pours two hot steaming mugs while I unwrap the marshmallows. The whole act feels intimate, the two of us back here alone, making a snack together. Like we might have in years past. I might have wrapped my arm around her waist and snuck a kiss with tongue in before her brother could find us. The fantasy begins



to come to life: my hand sneaking into her snow pants to meet warm, smooth skin, her teeth scraping against my throat, my core meeting hers as I back her up into the counter, and the taste of chocolate on her tongue as I suck it into my mouth ...

“When did you get home from school?” Her question invades my imaginary scenario, and I have to stifle a groan.

“Two days ago. How about you?”

Even if I shouldn't be having daydreams about my ex, hope fills me that we could do this, actually be cordial. Especially if we keep our conversation to small talk.

“A week ago. You didn't get to celebrate with your grandpa, then?” Her expression takes on a sympathetic pout, and even if I hate people worrying about my family life, it feels nice that she cares.

“No, that was a bummer. Next year, I'm hoping I can fly him out to Miami.” When I can afford it, but I don't add that.

Growing up with my grandfather as the only parent in my life was both wonderful and sad. Grandpa is the best of us, a man who takes responsibility and loves everyone around him. He raised me with a gentle yet firm approach and was a dutiful parent but also a caring friend. As far as my upbringing, I didn't have a traumatic one compared to a lot of people out there. Yet, I still wonder what it would have been like to come from a home with two loving parents.

My parents took off just after they had me, and I'm not even sure they lasted together much longer than that. Honestly, neither Grandpa nor I know much about their whereabouts or lives. They got pregnant with me when they were nineteen, were into a pretty hard and fast lifestyle, and neither wanted to hit pause to raise a kid.

According to him, and the rare family relative who'd been around during my childhood, it had been a no-brainer for my grandpa to step up. I'm so lucky he did, as I don't know where I'd be if he hadn't. But still, the fantasy of what my biological mother and father would have been like if we were a real family flits through my head every so often. Not as much as it

used to when I was a naive child, thinking that one day they might return, but it's a thought in the back of my mind.

Our conversation has gone cold, with Emily avoiding eye contact over the rim of her mug as we drink in silence. One of us should leave this little break room; this interaction is growing more awkward by the second, but I can't bring myself to.

"Your hair, it's shorter than when I last saw you." I circle back to the comment I made when I walked in.

She's always had this kind of hair that draws you in. It's the first thing I ever noticed about her. All of those mocha brown, almost black, wavy curls cascading down her back. It would whip up on the playground, surrounding her like this dark halo. When we were together, I used to run my fingers through it constantly. It's gorgeous still, but she's cut it to her shoulders, the edgier angles of it giving her this intimidating presence that only makes me want to come closer. Wrap it around my fist when I—

"Uh, yeah, I needed a change." She says the sentence like she's rolling it around in her mouth, testing out how it feels.

And because I'm still in a fog of remembering what it was like to be with her, no clothes between us and my hands on her body, I don't realize what I'm saying.

"Isn't that one of those breakup things girls do?"

The words fall out without me thinking of them very much, but my heart lurches the moment it registers. The very thought of her with someone else has my veins going colder than they were all day while I stood in inches of snow.

Of course, in reality, I know that we've both been with other people since we've been apart. I'm not a saint, and I wouldn't expect that she'd carry a torch for me. After all, Emily is the one who proposed our breakup.

Still, it feels like a tiny knife slicing through my ventricles to realize she's lived so many other lives, with other people, since we had our time together.

“How very cliché and sexist of you, Mercer.” Her voice drips sweet venom, but then she blanches. “But yeah, technically, I did it after a breakup.”

That delivery of that news packs an emotional punch. My throat goes dry, my insides cringe. A million thoughts start running through my head.

“When did the breakup happen?” That’s the first question that leaves my mouth.

Why I’m even getting into this with her, sitting here in this room when I should be at home, is lost on me. Emily is the one who didn’t want me, and she’s the one who left for college like my broken heart meant nothing. Yet I always want more when it comes to her. I want to be close to her, hear her voice, learn about what’s on her mind. This addiction of mine hasn’t faded with time or distance, and it would be concerning ... if I wasn’t actively denying to myself that it was happening.

“In October. We hadn’t been—” She cuts herself off and slants those hazel eyes at me skeptically. “Do you really care about this? Why are you still here, Mercer? It’s way past time you went home.”

I’ve gotten under her skin; I see it in the telltale flush of her cheeks, and now I’m the enemy again. After she spent the day trying her hardest to give me that polite fucking smile I hate.

“Sorry, why are you all huffy with me?” Her frustration at my presence is starting to tick me off.

Her cheeks are now as red as a cherry, and it matches the shade of her nose bitten from the cold. “I’m not being huffy at all. I just don’t understand why you’re working here. I mean, isn’t it not good for athletes to do strenuous work outside of their sport for fear of injury? Or well, re-injury. And it’s not like you need the money, not that my parents pay much for hauling trees.”

Damn, she really doesn’t want me here. On top of all the stuff she’s assuming about me, it’s clear that my working here makes her uncomfortable. I’m just not sure why.

“Last I checked, you’re the one who didn’t want to be together anymore. And that was three years ago, so I assumed it was water under the bridge? There is no reason I can’t come help your family out for the season.”

It wasn’t subtle of me to throw our breakup out there, but it’s not fair of her to throw false accusations in my face either, so I guess we’re even.

“I’m not ... you don’t ...” Emily takes what looks to be a centering breath, then pastes that stupid fucking smile back on. “There isn’t any reason you can’t be here. I just find it odd, after all these years away. But if it makes you happy and it makes Charlie happy, who am I to complain.”

Thing is, I want her to complain. Her annoyance and frustration are better than this polite facade. I’ll take reactive emotion over nonchalance any day of the week when it comes to her. And because I feel the need to dispel some of the untruths she accused me of, I tell her the real reason I’m here. Well, part of it.

“I’m balancing on what feels like the last page of this chapter of my life. Come graduation, life is going to get complicated. I don’t know; I wanted one more Christmas at home doing the same things I’ve always done.”

Her lashes flutter shut, then open, and the raw look she hits me with slams into my chest. I shouldn’t be so interested in what she has to say about my life or why she might understand it so well. And yet ...

“I get that,” she says quietly, and suddenly, we’re much closer than we were mere seconds ago.

My body invades her space, her sweater nearly touching my flannel long sleeve. Emily isn’t a short girl, but I tower over her, and the effect of her eyes batting up at me as she realizes how little space exists between us sends lust shooting down my spine. If I were to shuffle just a centimeter forward, her breasts would be pressed against me. Those round, perky tits with nipples the color of roses, so perfect and budded whenever I sucked them between my teeth.

Long lashes flutter onto her cheeks, and I realize Emily is inhaling deeply as if to get herself under control. Lord knows I'm a handbreadth away from snapping, and that torturous devil on my shoulder wonders what she'd do if I claimed her mouth right now. As cold as I was when I walked in here, the air in the room has reached a boiling point. I wouldn't be surprised to see steam coming off my skin with how worked up I'm getting.

And she hasn't even touched me. I haven't laid a finger on her. I was foolish to think I could come back here and not feel this insane, intense chemistry between us. It's always existed, this magnetic spark that draws us together. Isn't that overwhelming feeling, that endgame attraction, the reason Emily broke us in the first place? We weren't ready for it, isn't that what she said?

What if I am now? What if I always have been?

Her teeth gnaw on her bottom lip, and my gaze zeroes in, wanting to take that plumpness with my mouth and suck on it until she says my name. Moving with all the caution of a wild animal stalking its prey, taking care to stay quiet and not spook her, I begin to lean forward. This may be the dumbest thing to do right now, but my brain won't work, and my heart doesn't care to listen.

A slamming sound from just outside the door invades my irrational thoughts, and suddenly, Emily is ducking around my body and scooping up her cold-weather gear once more.

With her hand on the doorknob, she turns to meet my eyes one more time. For a split second, I think she might come back. I think she might say something, say *anything*. But her mouth opens then shuts, and before I can try to gently grab her elbow, she's out the door.

Only now do I realize how impossible working with her day in and day out is going to be. There is a real chance I might spill my guts and confess to exactly how I want her in my life moving forward. For some reason, I'm completely tempted to make us all or nothing.

A quiet morning in the Palmer house is so rare that I cherish it when I spend time at home these days.

My mom and dad are both early risers and seem to have instilled that in Charlie and me, whether we like it or not. By six a.m. most days, Dad has the juicer going in the kitchen, Mom is doing a Pilates class in the living room, our dog Sparky is playing fetch by himself, flinging a tennis ball all over the first floor, and my brother is blasting music while trying to pump out pushups like a moron.

I roll over, sleep hazy in my eyes and brain, as I curse this family-wide habit of being early birds. Typically, I've already gotten a two-mile walk or run in. That's the way I like to wake up. But this morning? I can barely drag myself to sit up in my sheets.

And it's all Mercer Russell's fault.

I'm surprised there aren't two eye-shaped holes in my ceiling from how hard I was staring up at it until three a.m. Sleep evaded me, replaced by an anxiety I couldn't shake until I gave in and took an emergency pill to help my brain shut down.

Turns out, my haircut isn't the only thing that's changed about me in the last couple of months. No, the beginning of the fall semester this year feels decades in the past with what I've been through since then. My brain and emotions feel like they've survived a war, my own private battle being put on in my head.

Dating in college has been a bunch of random relationships, quick to heat up and fizzle out, until I stumble on the next guy who I think might fill the spot of a person who is irreplaceable. I've been a bit flippant and flaky, as my roommate and best friend, Zoe, likes to remind me. At first, I'll be all about the guy I'm seeing. I want to put real effort into getting to know them, will talk to them via text all the time, and agree to go anywhere and everywhere to hang out. But then the first week ends, and I become a little less enthusiastic. My schedule gets in the way, or I'm too busy hanging out with friends. These are excuses I use because something inside me just fizzles. The guy I'm seeing will show up, and I know, deep in my heart, that I have zero spark with him. Zoe says I like to try to power through, but it never works. And by the end of about three weeks, I'm leaving the poor bastard behind when he's done nothing wrong.

I wish I weren't like this. I wish that my heart could latch onto these men who are, for all intents and purposes, really great candidates for boyfriends. It's not like they did anything or hurt me in any way. Simply put, my attraction to anyone seems to vanish. The candle flickers out so quickly, and there is nothing I can do to reignite it, no matter how hard I want to.

Which is why Rich had surprised me. For the first time in three and a half years, my interest in a man outlasted that three-week period. By the end of September, we were full-fledged boyfriend and girlfriend, and I was so into him it was scaring me. In a good way, though, because I wanted to be around him all the time. The world seemed to focus back into view a little bit for the first time since I'd broken up with Mercer. They say love makes you see colors more clearly, right? Well, I wasn't in love, but it was the first time while at school that I could see myself getting there.

Until mid-October, when I walked into a bathroom at a Friday night party and found my boyfriend with his fingers in another girl's pants while his tongue was down her throat. They'd been going at it so sloppily with all that alcohol involved that it took him three full minutes to register who was standing in front of him.

My heart felt like it dropped out of my butt. I'd been on the verge of tears, and my fingers and thighs started to go numb. My extremities tingled like they weren't getting enough blood flow, and then the breathlessness came on. Zoe found me huddled on the front porch, trying to gulp air into my lungs, and took me home.

The next day, I woke up and thought I'd dreamed it, but no. The ugly reality was that my boyfriend had cheated on me, and I was oddly devastated. Naively, I'd assumed that since I'd finally been able to connect with a guy for more than that initial meeting period, he'd naturally be super into me as well. Never once had I thought that Rich would betray me like that, but then I guess I was so focused on breaking through my issues that I wasn't focused on who he was inside. Who was he? A player, apparently. A typical college fuck boy who wanted to eat his cake and then some more cake. And some more, from what I heard after we broke up.

The lasting impact Rich left on me, though? Anxiety. I wasn't as upset about the breakup as I was with my own blindness to it. How could this be going on under my nose, and I had no idea? I felt crazy, like I couldn't trust anything I was thinking or my instincts, which I'd never doubted before. My thoughts would spiral out of control until I felt like I couldn't breathe, like all the feeling was being sucked from my arms and legs. I'd never been so unsure of who I was, how I was viewed in the world, or what I was supposed to do with all the negativity I was feeling. Discovering Rich cheating was a knock to my fundamental makeup, even if his philandering had nothing to do with me.

Yes, the haircut was one way of coping. Of trying to take control when I felt like I had none. Getting medication after consulting with the school health center was another change, one that only my mother knows about. When the anxiety attacks started to get so bad that I felt my heart might give out from the strain, when I couldn't sleep and would go days without it, I knew I had to do something.

The university doctor I saw did a full workup, talked me through what was going on, and then prescribed me a low-



dose medication to take daily. She also prescribed medication to take when the attacks became unmanageable so that I could calm down enough to function and sleep and not end up walking through life like a zombie.

So, on nights when things got really bad, when I couldn't seem to shut my mind off, and the thoughts were making me want to sink into a hole in my mattress, I took one of the pills to calm and make me drowsy. They worked well, and I was trying to use them sparingly, but last night called for medical intervention.

Mercer was going to kiss me in the break room, of that, I'm sure. We were too close, our bodies were too warm, the chemistry was nearly a living being standing right there with us. Those brilliant blue eyes had been glued to my mouth, and I saw him lean in. I'd begun to flutter my eyes closed, had been practically chanting in my head for him to lay one on me, and then the spell had broken.

*What if he had? What if we couldn't stop? What if I admitted I'd made a horrible mistake all those years ago? What if he didn't feel the same about me anymore and just wanted a hookup? What if I fell further in love with him and then he left?*

Those questions, all the scenarios running around my mind, all the futures I was trying to predict, they wouldn't leave me alone. My brain wouldn't shut off. No matter what I did, whether reading a book, watching a show, or playing a stupid game on my phone, none of it would help me get to sleep.

So I took a pill, passed out, and now I feel like I'm being dragged earth-side from under the water trying to get up this morning. My limbs feel heavy, my mind foggy, my eyes keep shutting because I don't want to get up. Except the people I love the most in this world are making that very difficult right now. Since I only got to sleep at three a.m. and my phone clock reads 6:17 a.m. when I roll over to read it, that means I haven't given the drowsiness the pill delivers enough time to wear off.

Knowing I won't get back to sleep, I throw my feet over the side of the bed and roll my shoulders while trying to summon any of the energy my family seems to be demonstrating.

The first thing I see as I pad down the stairs are the clear plastic tubs of Christmas lights and decorations sitting in the front hallway. And the first thing I hear is my brother groaning about them.

"You do realize you make your kids practically work for free on a tree farm, right? Now I'm supposed to do labor at home, too? And don't even say you won't make me climb up on the roof to hang the icicle lights, because I always end up being the one who has to do it."

I smack his arm as I pass because our parents might ask us to work, but they also pay for our lives in return. Neither Charlie nor I have had to take out a single school loan, which is a lot more than I can say for most of my friends and classmates.

"Putting up the lights and decorations is one of our favorite things to do, jerk. You always do this. You complain for the first five minutes and then end up loving it when you get to take out all the ornaments you made in art class as a kid."

Charlie cocks his head to the side, sweat beads on his temple from his little bro-out session. "I did make a pretty kick-ass Santa in a rowboat."

A yawn stifles my answer, and I burrow into the neckline of an old Queenwood soccer sweatshirt. I won't admit that this is Mercer's, even if my whole family eyes it every time I wear it while home on breaks.

"You look exhausted," Charlie observes as we walk to the kitchen.

Mom turns as he says this from where she's frying eggs in a pan. "Hmm, he's right, sweetheart. You don't look like you got any sleep."

"You'd be correct." I give them both an annoyed smile as I plop down into my designated chair at the kitchen table. "Is

there coffee?”

“Charlie, get your sister a cup of coffee, the pot is full,” Mom instructs, and I catch the concern in her eyes once my brother turns around.

“Is anyone going to the store today? I need more deodorant.” My brother hands me a steaming cup of java before sitting next to me in his designated seat.

Everything about our childhood home always makes me feel so nostalgic and cozy. Like nothing bad could ever happen to me here because I am in the confines of the place that raised me. Right down to the way my sibling and I take our usual spots, I ache for this when I’m away.

“Are you finally admitting you stink?” I tease him.

Charlie rolls his eyes at me as he picks at the Santa-shaped placements Mom put on the table. “Says the girl who definitely didn’t brush her teeth last night.”

I blow a breath directly in his face because we’re siblings, and even if we can legally drink now, we’re still going to act like idiotic children when we’re in the same room.

“After breakfast, I need you two to help Dad bring up more of the Christmas bins. I want the first floor done by this afternoon. Oh, and Emily, Maria wanted to know if you’d signed up for the nursing boards yet?” Setting our plates of eggs and bacon down, my mom serves us like we’re still her babies in need of constant care.

I think, or well, I know, that she misses us terribly when we’re gone. Dad will call me sometimes to see if I can make a random trip home. While Mom says she likes the empty nest life and the time she and Dad get to spend together, she’s one of those mothers who truly loves being one. She gets fulfillment from raising her babies and loving on them. Even as independent as I am, I let her do it to a further extent when I’m home because I know she enjoys it.

“Not yet, I have to register sometime this semester and then they’ll happen around June.”

Mom's best friend for years, Maria, is a nurse at the local Queenwood hospital. She's part of the reason I wanted to get into this track; Maria would always come and tell me stories about her time in the emergency room or certain patients she'd worked with. When she suggested I become an EMT in high school to see if I wanted to pursue a career in nursing or medicine, it sounded like a great idea.

Turned out, I fucking loved it. The high of those pressure situations, the tenderness of caring for people, the absolute hustle it took to do that job day in and day out, I knew it was what I was meant to do. But it wasn't until I was part of an emergency delivery on the side of the road that I discovered what field of nursing I wanted to go into.

The patient had been a nine-months pregnant woman who hit a deer on a dark back road about three miles from her home. I was a senior in high school working one of my weekly assigned shifts and was put on the call with two of the more experienced EMTs. When we got to the scene, she was in labor and trying desperately not to have the baby on the side of the road. Only one of my colleagues had never been present for a birth, and we were sorely at a disadvantage in the situation.

But it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. The creation of life, the struggle and resiliency of that mother. The way we had to support her while she battled through ... at that moment, I knew what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.

In my last few semesters, my clinical work has been more of a priority than classroom work. One of those rotations was labor and delivery, and it cemented my passion to work with pregnant, laboring, and postpartum mothers.

Now, I need to graduate and take my NCLEX, the certification boards, to be a legally working RN.

"You can work before then, though? I forget what you told me." She sips her tea with a huge grin on her face, and I know it's because she's getting to have breakfast with Charlie and me.

Nodding, I almost groan when I eat a bite of her eggs. There is just something about home cooking from your mother that soothes like nothing else can.

“Yeah, I’m trying to see if the L and D department at the hospital I just worked at is going to be taking applications for this summer or fall. I really loved the director on that floor, and the OBs they work with are all really knowledgeable and attentive. It would be a great place to work, but it’s all up in the air right now.”

Plus, thinking about entering the real world is adding to my anxiety these days, but I don’t add that. While I’m so excited about starting my career, I also can’t get this feeling of nausea to go away when I think about the future. It’s probably just the fear of the unknown that’s throwing me for a loop.

“Hun, you have to tell me how you want these mini-trees placed down the porch stairs!” Dad hollers from the front door.

He’s nothing if not focused on making my mother ridiculously happy, and going all out for Christmas makes her ecstatic. Mom goes in search of Dad, leaving my brother and me to take bites in silence.

My mind wanders back to Mercer and our encounters yesterday. Those eyes won’t stop flashing through my memory; how he always looks at me like he sees what I really want and need is unnerving. I’m not sure how I’ll get through winter break working side by side with him. We couldn’t even make it twenty-four hours into seeing each other without an almost kiss.

“Did Mercer tell you if he thought it was weird to be working together?” The question slips out before I can convince myself not to say it.

My brother and I don’t have many secrets. Being born so close together, we grew up like twins and have a similar bond. The one subject that has been off-limits, though, is his best friend. Both when we were dating and after it was over. But no one in my life has as much info on Mercer as my brother does, and I’m going a little nutty after my night of no sleep.

“I don’t know, Emmy. We don’t talk about you. It was one of the things we agreed upon after we started hanging out again.”

Charlie is way too bro-ish to use the term “repair our friendship,” but that’s what he and Mercer had done a while after our breakup. When we initially started dating, there was some tension between my brother and his best friend. But Mercer insisted on never keeping us a secret from Charlie, and I think my brother respected that his best friend never lied to him about our relationship. After a while, Charlie accepted that we were falling for each other and didn’t object. Well, he still taunted us mercilessly, but it seemed good-natured.

When I broke up with Mercer, Charlie was so angry at me. And at his best friend because he’d been put in a position where the relationship between all three of us was now awkward. It had taken the two boys a good amount of time to get back to how they typically acted around each other. But Charlie let it slip once, about a year ago, that they’d made the pact never to discuss me out of fear that it would harm their friendship again.

“Yeah, I know.” I hang my head a little. “I just want this Christmas to be perfect. It’s our last one at home as kids if you think about it. I just ... I don’t want whatever friction there may be to get in the way of that.”

“Considering you’re the one who broke the dude’s heart, I think you’re safe there. Mercer isn’t like that, he probably doesn’t even hold a grudge anymore. Look at his life, Em. No offense, you probably did him a favor letting him be single in college.”

The thought makes my stomach sour until bile collects at the dip of my throat. But before I can ask my brother if he really means that or if he’s trying to get back at me for breaking his friend’s heart years ago, our father interrupts.

Dad hurries into the kitchen, his glasses askew and his hair, the same shade as my own, nearly falling into his eyes.

“Your mother is trying to get on the roof to secure the light-up reindeer. I need backup. She won’t listen to me.”

My brother rolls his eyes, but his chair makes a high-pitched sound as it scrapes across the floor with his haste. I quickly follow suit because my mother will definitely injure herself in her obsession with perfecting this holiday.

Charlie and I make it outside before she can step foot on the ladder, and he takes over, carrying one of the fake white wooden animals up to the second story of the house.

“Emily, help me untangle these candy canes so we can line the driveway,” Mom insists, and she already has Christmas music playing from the old radio Dad keeps in the garage.

It’s a chilly morning but not unbearable, not like the year she made us put these up on December first when it was already blizzarding in New Jersey. Not many people are even awake in our little suburban neighborhood, the builder-grade homes coming in four different styles that are scattered along the interwoven streets. We’ve lived here since before I was born, and I know I’ll sob when the day comes for my parents to sell it.

“You think we can get this all done by noon? I have a yoga class Jean signed us up for,” Mom asks.

“Yeah, we’ll get to most of it so long as Dad doesn’t take his usual mid-morning nap in the recliner. Plus, I’m going to meet Genny for lunch, she just got home from that study abroad program she was doing in Vienna.”

“Oh, how lovely. Tell her I say hi, and that her pictures online just looked gorgeous.” Mom swoons, a dreamy look in her eye.

While my mom is the definition of suburban and loves it that way, I think deep down she has a travel bug that’s never been snuffed out. I’ll have to make mention of that to Dad sometime and convince him to take her somewhere. The duties of a noble and attentive only daughter, you know?

“Will do.” I salute her.

Genny and I were best friends in high school, and while we’ve stayed in touch during college, it’s not the same. Not anyone’s fault, but we’ve drifted. It’ll be nice to get lunch with

her to catch up and gossip about our high school peers, who I can't chat about with anyone else.

She's also one of the only friends I have who knew me when I was with Mercer. It might be just the thing, I need to bend her ear about my ex, who has only gotten more gorgeous with time. Genny will be able to talk me down from the anxiety attack I always seem on the verge of diving into now that I have to be around Mercer day in and day out.

But the thoughts are pushed to the back of my mind as my family works around the front yard together, recalling holidays past and singing off-key to the Christmas carols on the radio.

It might be early, and it might be cold, but this is the beauty of this season. And once next year rolls around, I'm not sure we'll get days like this one. So, I'm going to cherish every second before life changes completely.



**D**riving through Queenwood in my grandpa's old GMC pickup is surreal.

Winding through the suburban streets past my former high school, the soccer complex I played in during youth league, the restaurant I worked my first job at, and everything in between, is like a blast from the past. Out the window is this town and world that made up so much of my life, yet it doesn't feel familiar.

I've always felt I was bigger than Queenwood, but I could never voice exactly why. Don't get me wrong, growing up among the fast-food chains, thick forests, manicured parks, and Friday night hangout spots was pretty idyllic. I partied in my youth just like every other bonehead teenage boy and ran around goofing off. My childhood was spent how every kids should be, and I'm thankful for that. But I knew, from a young age, that this town wasn't mine to keep. I needed bigger, greater, a life that would send adrenaline rushing through my veins and energy lighting me up from head to toe.

The first time I played in front of that Miami college crowd, I got it. I knew what I was destined for. Sure, I played in big tournaments before that, had my name mentioned on a national soccer level, but there was something about that first college championship we played at the end of my freshman year. It was like all the pieces I'd been searching for just clicked into place. Not only am I obsessed with the game, couldn't function if I couldn't play it, but the rush of the crowd

screaming above my head only adds to the passion I have for the sport.

That almost got taken from me in a millisecond. I rub at my knee as I drive. No, there isn't pain there, but it's almost like phantom twinges of the injury still come back to remind me I'm not infallible. That something can end the dream I've had in a mere moment.

I'd been cutting in for a kick when my body hit the ground so hard, the air was knocked out of my lungs. For a few minutes, I had no idea what happened. The shock and adrenaline masked the agony of both my MCL and ACL tearing. But then it came rushing at me, the shouts of a thousand people in the stadium, my teammates in my face, the refs asking if I was okay ... it registered and then so did the torn ligaments in my knee.

All I remember after was writhing around in pain, and then the cloud of painkillers as I came in and out of consciousness in the hospital. It took a few days for everything to sink in, but I refused to let the depression or bitterness invade.

If I had, I wouldn't have gotten up out of that bed. I wouldn't have nearly killed myself in rehab to get back to a place where I could run down a soccer field. I wouldn't have bled, sweat, and gone insane clawing my way out of a senior season I couldn't play as my team went on to win the championship without me.

I wouldn't have recovered after my agent called with the worst news I'd had delivered in my adult life; I would not be getting drafted. Teams weren't sure about me or if I'd ever play again.

Instead of sinking further into myself or letting the horrible facts of where I was crash in on my head, I got angry. I wanted revenge. I wanted to come back so strong that teams would be salivating over themselves to sign me as an undrafted free agent.

So that's what I did. I've been working with the best trainers and league renowned names who could get the right word out to people. Videos of my training on their pages have

gone viral, and both commenters and commentators had been astounded at how good my performance looks. A particularly cool video of me taking corner kicks and sinking one after another with the previously injured knee of my kicking foot had teams calling up my agent with interest in the past few weeks.

The pros were closer and closer every day, even if the disappointment of things not working out as they should have still stung. Giving up isn't an option, though, so I didn't even entertain it. Even if it's not healthy to just ignore the emotions tangled up in my injury.

Coming back to Queenwood gave me a sort of reprieve from the intense feelings this period of my life had whirled up. A nostalgic comfort settles in my chest as I drive through town. The typical gold tinsel bells are hung from every lamppost on the main drags, while the town square boasts its three fake life-size horses. I still have zero idea what the backstory is with them, but they're a staple. For every holiday from Valentine's to Halloween, the residents dress them up in coordinating garb. Right now, they're sporting holiday colors for Christmas, Kwanza, and Hanukkah, respectively.

When Gramps mentioned we needed some essentials like milk and fruit, I swiped his keys from the counter and told him to stay put. He's the most active and exuberant seventy-year-old I know, but I still like the thought of catering to him when I can. The man took me in when I had no one, raised me like his own son, and gave me all the trappings of a life any kid could want. So if I have the chance to repay him, I'm going to take it every time. As soon as I get signed to a team, universe willing, I'm paying off the house he still has a mortgage on because he didn't count on raising a teenage boy well into his retirement years.

Bill Huxley's, the grocery store everyone in Queenwood frequents rather than the big box chain down the highway, is still relatively empty as I get a cart and roll it inside.

"Morning," one of the workers greets me as I make my way through the produce section, and I nod in reciprocation.

In high school, I used to do this for our household more often than not, since Grandpa worked so much to provide me with everything I needed. While he gave me all the freedom of being a kid, I still had more responsibility than most because of the situation my parents had left me in. I'm not complaining, but as the time to enter the real world grows closer, I'm thankful that I had to grow up quicker than most. I feel prepared in a practical sense, even if I am a bit terrified to move into this next chapter. Even if I want to go pro so badly, I can taste it, there is always this raw anxiety inside me at the thought of the next stage in life. It feels like I experienced that transition harder than my peers, like it took me longer to adjust to my world changing. Probably because I've been experiencing that far longer than they have, and from a very young age.

My cart is about half full of stuff Gramps didn't even ask for by the time I'm through a bunch of aisles. The danger of grocery shopping on an empty stomach is that you'll throw in anything that sounds remotely appetizing.

"*Mercy? Mercy!* That is you. Damn, bro, I haven't seen you in town in a minute."

As I turn toward the sound of my name being yelled, I see Clyde McGibbon sauntering down the aisle with cereal boxes lining his approach. It's some small-town runway for a guy whose ego has always been too big. Clyde isn't necessarily a bad guy, just annoying and incessant. He's the type of person who I never want to get too close to or tell too many personal details because part of me always thinks they'll end up in a reporter's mic if I ever make it to the big time.

Now that I'm so close to that future, I'm even more cautious. Clyde and I played soccer together in high school, and he was constantly trying to outdo me but never quite accomplished it. Now that he's destined for tree farm ownership when his parents retire, and I'm hopefully going to live out my soccer dreams, I feel the need to tread lightly with how many interactions we have while I'm back in town.

"Hey, Clyde. How's it going?" I try to put a friendly smile on my face but maintain an aloofness.

Bypassing it altogether, he skirts around my cart and pulls me in for a bro hug. The guy is wearing way too much cologne for a Tuesday morning grocery store trip, and I notice the beer belly he's sporting.

"I'm good, man. Fucking sucks to be home for a month, but at least we're legal for these lame bars now, am I right?" His smile makes me cringe inside.

"Uh, yeah." I scratch the back of my neck.

I didn't enjoy talking to this guy when I had to because we were on the same team. But now? It feels like a chore, and we're the only two people in this aisle.

"You, uh, working for your family, too? Must be nice to see them." Finding that question felt like pulling teeth.

He rolls his eyes. "My mom is being so annoying, dragging us out to cut the trees and help customers. Be happy you don't have to do this shit anymore."

"Actually, I'm working at Palmers for the month I'm home. I enjoy it; the cold air feels refreshing from the humidity in Miami most of the year." I chuckle in that way people do when they're trying to make small talk.

Clyde's eyes go wide, and his expression conveys that I might be a moron to talk down on my warm weather college town.

"Dude, be real, no, it's not. Why are you even working for the Palmers anyway? Didn't Emily like kick you to the curb?" He scratches his head like he can't figure out why I'd want to be cordial with someone who wronged me back in high school.

"Charlie and his family are really great people, and I wanted one last season on the farm." I give him the simple answer because he couldn't dissect the real one anyway.

"Eh, she probably did you a favor, huh? You must get so many chicks down in Miami. Fuck, I need to take a trip down there."

*Not to visit me, buddy.*

The insinuation has annoyance bubbling up inside me because he thinks I could ever replace Emily with some one-night stand. Sure, there have been girls. I wouldn't lie and say I've been celibate for three and a half years. But it's far fewer than many would assume, and none of them have come close to my first love.

"All right, well, I need to get these groceries home to my grandpa. But it was good seeing you." I try to make my escape, but Clyde puts a palm to my chest.

"Hey, if you're working at a tree farm this season, might as well make it ours. My parents would love to have *the* Mercer Russell working for them. And you could win the tree-off, because we're definitely kicking ass this year."

Stooping so low as to poach me from my best friend's farm to win some small-town contest? Yeah, that's Clyde for you.

"Thanks, man, but I already started with the Palmers. I'm happy there. Good luck, though." Again, I try to wheel my cart around him.

And again, he takes hold of my arm. One more second of this and I'll lay him out, no matter what that does for my reputation. The guy is a moronic bully with no filter, and this is more than I can handle on a Tuesday morning.

"Nah, we don't need luck. Watch your back, Russell. We're coming for you and those perfect Palmers, too. Five years is the end of the streak." His voice is meant to be intimidating, but all I can do is choke back a laugh.

Clyde has more bark than bite, and even his bark is weak. If he thinks the Palmers or I are going to be rattled by a threat about a Christmas tree contest, he's sorely mistaken.

My stomach grumbles as I checkout, stow the last bag in the trunk, and then return my cart to the metal organizer. It's still pretty early, but one look across the street, and I see the smoke stack coming from the roof of a building I'm all too familiar with.

The Square Street Diner used to be my old stomping ground. From team dinners to dates to late-night munchie runs,

my friends and I always seemed to end up at the diner. It looks like it hasn't changed a bit, with its silver facade and Christmas sticker decals dotting the windows. The blowup Santa in front also hasn't been replaced since I was last here, and suddenly, I'm locking the truck and jogging across the street.

Their Southwest burrito is calling my name, and a plan formulates in my head to get Grandpa a Styrofoam to-go container of their maple oatmeal waffles as well. But before I can put in my order at the counter and request an extra-large cup of coffee to take on my drive home, a tinkling laugh that's been tattooed on my memory for years hits my ears.

A few booths back into the diner sits Emily, her back to me, but all that gorgeous chocolate hair begging to be played with. Across from her, facing me, is Genny, the girl she used to get into all kinds of mischief with back in high school.

It would figure I can't escape her anywhere in this town. But especially here.

Where I took her on our first date.

“Hi, beautiful!”

Genny jumps up the minute I pull open the door to the diner, and then she comes at me, a cloud of citrus perfume and wild white-blond curls. As she envelops me in a hug, I can't help the tears that collect at the corners of my eyes.

It's been a long time since we've seen each other, but this person used to be my everything. My best friend, my one confidant. She knows all my embarrassing coming-of-age stories and experienced them right alongside me. After everything I've been through in the past few months, it feels good to hold someone who knew me before I felt like my mind turned against me.

“It's so damn good to see you,” I tell her as I give one last little squeeze before we slide into the booth she got us.

“I know, I feel the same about seeing you! There is something about being in this diner with you that makes all the homesickness I experienced last semester totally worth it.”

The Square Street Diner has seen us at our best and worst through the years, and when Genny demanded we come here, she got no argument from me. From its nineteen-eighties decor to the smell of bacon and grease that seems to have seeped into the walls, it's one of my favorite places in Queenwood, not to mention the world.

Red and green tinsel hang from the ceiling of the diner, and every booth has a little mistletoe affixed to the mini



jukebox at each table. They're playing holiday tunes, and drawings of Christmas trees done by the local elementary schools are hung in a gallery on the wall by the front door.

"Tell me all about Vienna. I need to know everything. Your pictures looked magical."

Genny fiddles with her nose ring as she talks. She's always been a bit edgier than me when it comes to fashion and what she adorns her body with. The minute she turned eighteen, she made me accompany her to a tattoo shop so she could get her first one without her parents legally objecting. Along with that book quote she got inked on her arm, she has two cartilage piercings in her ears. Even now, while the December weather is turning frigid, Genny sits across from me in black leather shorts, tights, and a cropped cream-colored sweater. She looks ridiculously fashionable for our small town, yet fits in just the same. That's just Gen for you, and it's something I've always loved about her.

"So, then, I met this guy who took me to the Alps for two weeks—" We're interrupted before she can tell me more.

"Afternoon, ladies. What can I get for you?" Our waitress flicks her Christmas tree earrings with the pen she's holding and snaps her gum in a rhythm that's almost soothing.

Neither Genny nor I have opened our menus because we already know what we want.

"Can I have an egg salad sandwich and an orange soda?" I ask, fulfilling all my weird diner choices in one go.

With a menu that has any comfort food you might want, Gen and I usually order the strangest combination of items and revel in doing so.

Across the booth, my high school bestie gives me a knowing smile. "And I'll have the short stack of chocolate chip pancakes, a side of fries, and can we also get two egg creams?"

A laugh booms out of me at her last request. We discovered egg creams one night junior year while coming in a little too tipsy for our own good. She selected them because

her drunk ass thought the name was funny or maybe sexual, and we became obsessed when we tried them. It warms my heart that even after all this time apart, she hasn't forgotten to order them.

Our waitress nods and turns for the kitchen.

“So, what about this Alps guy?”

“Turns out his family had this gorgeous log cabin up there, in this little mountain village town. I swear, Em, it was something out of a fairy tale. Every morning, he'd wake me with a fresh cappuccino, then we'd walk along the meadow trail while snow coated our jackets. Rupert would end the night lighting a fire for us and putting on some old record, it was so romantic. Then there was the sex ... holy shit!” Gen shudders like she's remembering it.

I can feel the blush on my cheeks as I look around. “Keep it down, would ya?”

“Psh, there is no one in here except that guy, and he definitely can't hear me.” She points to an elderly man eating breakfast at the counter.

“That sounds incredible, though. I feel like you've lived a thousand lives while I've just been stuck in DC.”

The waitress returns with our food and drinks, and we both tuck into our meals. There is something about egg salad for breakfast that reminds me of home, and if that is a weird sentence, then you've never had a strange comfort food.

“Oh stop, you love DC. And you love that hospital. You probably see way more cool and gross things in there than I did in Austria.” Her eyes light up, and I know she wants information.

Tilting my head to the side, I decide to give her a little funny anecdote. “Well, there was this one night in the ER where someone came in because they swallowed a piercing that had been attached to a penis. It got lodged in the tissue of her esophagus.”

Gen snorts, almost shooting egg cream from her nose. “Hell fucking no, that did not happen! That's hilarious,

although I'm sure that shit hurt. They should have sat on it instead, men with piercings really give a whole different meaning of full."

"Genny!" My face has to be maroon at this point.

One other thing about my childhood best friend: she's way more open about sex than I am. Not to say I don't enjoy being physical and intimate, but I can't bring myself to discuss my partners in the way Gen always has.

"I miss this." She points her fork at me before chewing the pancakes off of it. "We've gone too long without weekly or so catchups, and my friends at school just don't react to sex talk the way you do. You need me to corrupt you more. That's it, I'm calling you weekly from now on."

The smile that has my mouth curving up is genuine. "You have no idea how I've missed that. I'm sorry—"

"Nope, don't do that. No apologizing. We both got super busy, and that's just life. But we can choose to do something about it, which we will."

I love Genny even more for being the type of friend who doesn't hold a grudge or make this separation a thing. She just gets on with it, and we're back on track if we both put the effort forward.

"So, is everything right as rain at the tree farm this season? I need to come by and make fun of Charlie while he's working."

Gen has always had a nemesis-type relationship with my brother; the two of them act more like siblings than Charlie and I do. The pranks they've pulled on each other have been epic, including the time Charlie stuck sanitary pads to Gen's locker. So she got him back by covering them in red food coloring, getting his locker code from me, and double-crossing him by filling his backpack and books with period items.

"He'll both hate and love that, I'm sure." I cackle because the thought of a month of their antics has me excited. "But, uh, you'll also see another familiar face."

“Huh?” Gen is too busy scarfing down pancakes to realize I’ve stalled on my eating and am nervously ripping up my napkin.

“Mercer decided to work with us for the season.”

That has her fork clattering to the plate. “Wait, what? The prodigal town prince has returned?”

An anxious laugh escapes me as I roll my eyes. “I’m sure everyone is rolling out the red carpet for him, not that I’d know. I’ve done my best to be polite or avoid him.”

Gen looks at me like I’ve grown a third ear. “Um, why?”

The truth wars within me, but I have to let this out and tell *someone*. Gen has always been trustworthy, and even if she hasn’t been privy to the last three years of inner thoughts, she knew me when I was in love with Mercer.

“Because it’s awkward. He’s ... well, he’s Mercer. Drop-dead gorgeous, charming, and all-around perfect male specimen. And I’m the idiot who gave that up. The minute I saw him, it was like all these feelings of regret came rushing up at me. And we don’t have time for all that. It’s winter break, not some cuffing season rekindling. We’re both about to start our real lives, and I’m sure Mercer is not still hung up on me.”

“Oh, jeez, Em, you really still have it bad for that guy.” Gen sees right through me.

“What? No.” I shake my head vehemently.

A group of older women come in, giggling and talking loudly in ugly Christmas sweaters. It must be a set-up brunch for them, and Gen and I direct our attention to what is such a fun scene to watch.

When she turns back to me, her expression is stern. “Um, yes, you do, or you wouldn’t be thinking about all that. You know, I thought it was a mistake for you to break up back then, even if I wanted you to get screwed six ways from Sunday during college. But you guys really loved each other, and that kind of connection is hard to find. I can tell just from your face that you’re already sucked back in, and it’s been what, a week

since you've been home? That means Mercer Russell has had a hold on you for far longer than you've admitted to anyone."

My jaw is practically on the floor. "How the hell do you do that?"

"Read your mind?" She grins. "Girl, I've known you for a very, *very* long time. And I knew you two when you were all up in each other's junk as teens. I can read you like a book."

Sighing, I look down at my plate. "This is bad, Gen. Mercer seems to have this weird animosity toward me, and yet the other day in the barn break room, I thought maybe he was going to kiss me?"

She claps her hands together with glee. "I fail to see how this is bad. A hot little holiday fling with your ex who happens to be extremely hot. Hello, it's not like I haven't seen his social media pictures, or those magazine spreads he's done in recent years. Mercer used to be gorgeous, but twenties-something Mercer is a whole other story. You should hop on that."

"That's the worst idea you've had yet." I roll my eyes.

She shakes her head with a mouthful of food. "Nah, it's the best. It's been what, a couple months since you broke up with that idiot. What was his name?"

"Rich." My voice sounds hollow to my own ears when I say it.

Gen obviously doesn't know the whole story, just that the breakup had been messy. Not even my friends at school know how badly he hurt me; I hid the depression pretty well. This brunch isn't exactly the setting to tell her about how bad my mental health has been recently.

"Uh-oh, if it isn't double trouble."

Mercer's deep timbre hits my spine, and I shiver before turning to look over my shoulder.

There he is, as if conjured by our conversation, walking toward me in gray sweatpants, brown work boots, and a black

and brown flannel. The final nail in the coffin? A white backward ball cap. Jesus Christ, this man is a walking porn ad.

And because of Genny's sexy advice, all I can think about is scaling him like a tree. We lost our virginity to each other back in the day, and I thought that sex was out of this world even then. It was special and the first time I'd ever been so intimate with a boy. Exploring our sexuality and likes had been incredibly fun, and felt grown-up. I have no doubt that he's only improved since then, and I have to rub my thighs together under the table at the thought of what this Mercer's hands and cock could do now.

"No way!" Genny jumps up to hug him while I stay seated, shocked that he just appeared as if out of thin air.

He didn't hear any of that, did he? My God, I'd be mortified.

"Gen, how you doing? It's been so long." He smiles as they release each other.

"Soccer superstar, I'm good. I guess you're better, though. You're really doing it, huh? I hear all this talk about you, how crazy. And yet you've returned to our little town."

Mercer reaches up to play with the brim of his ball cap at the base of his skull, and it somehow only makes him more attractive, if that's even possible.

"Yeah, well, gotta see my gramps when I can. Em, good morning." He turns those baby blues on me, and my heart starts to gallop.

"Hey." I give a lame wave and curse myself.

It's the first time we've seen each other since he almost kissed me, and I can't imagine we'll ever talk about it.

"I'm just going to use the bathroom." Gen tries to hide her scheming smirk as she gets up and heads down the back hallway.

My heart slams into my chest at her quick exit. It's so obvious, and now he probably thinks we were talking about him.

Mercer is still standing over me, his blond waves curling under that backward hat in a way that makes my stomach feel like the carbonated soda I'm drinking.

"Can I sit? I'm waiting for my order to bring it home to Grandpa." His big body slides into the booth across from me, and it's like I'm transported back to yesteryear.

"That was nice of you. He always loved their maple waffles, right?" My eyes crinkle at the thought of Mercer's grandpa.

He's the best of men, a supportive, quiet guide through life, and I am so thankful he's been there for his grandson.

Mercer chuckles, the sound sending goose bumps skittering over my skin. "That's right. You remembered."

"We used to pick them up for him whenever we came back from the movies."

The memory slips out of my mouth before I can stop it, and I'm surprised it just popped out. Mercer and I had been together for nearly two years in high school, and each time we'd see a Friday night movie, we would bring takeout waffles home for his grandpa.

"Remember when I took you here for our first milkshake?" Those blue eyes bore into mine.

"You drank about three quarters of it." I smile down at the cracked linoleum table.

"I was so nervous to take you out. Part of me drank so much so that I wouldn't be able to talk and say something stupid." He laughs and flexes those big hands on the table.

"We'd been friends for years before that." I shake my head in disbelief. "I'd basically heard you say all the stupid stuff you were going to when you hung out with my brother."

Mercer shrugs. "Was still nervous as hell."

The summer before junior year, we'd been dancing around our feelings the entire break. I'd always had a crush on my brother's best friend, but that summer, it was like something intensified, and we couldn't contain it anymore. I'd feel

Mercer's eyes on me constantly, and there were a few nights when he'd get me alone, and I thought something might happen.

Only once he talked to my brother about it because he wanted to be noble did he finally ask me out. On a real date, to the diner for a meal. While other kids our age were making out in basements on group hangs with friends, Mercer Russell had wanted to take me on a real date.

I'd been so nervous but also relaxed at the same time, like being on the brink of something more with him was something that had been coming for a long time.

I desperately want to ask him if he was going to kiss me the other day. What that meant, and how it would have impacted us at the places we were in our lives now. But I'm too chicken, and it's not like opening this discussion up is somehow going to make things better.

"I just ran into Clyde at the grocery store. He issued some sort of threat about the tree-off." Mercer rolls his eyes, and I notice the subject change.

"Running his big mouth again, huh? He loves to do that." Clyde had been the exact same way in high school.

"Pretty much. If I have anything to do with it, we're going to wipe the floor with him." Mercer's dimple pops out, and I swear I swoon on the spot.

"All right, out of my seat, super star." Gen returns, and they swap places. "Can you join us?"

"As much as I'd like to, I have some waffles with my grandpa's name on them. But I'm sure I'll see you around, Genny. And Em, see you at work."

The gorgeous bastard winks as he turns to the counter to grab his takeout bag. I trail his exit, trying not to ogle the way his ass looks in those goddamn gray sweatpants.

That's when I hear Genny cackling across the booth. "Oh, girl, you have it *so* bad."



“No, this one is too big. You’ll break your back trying to get it in the house.”

A raspy voice hits my ears as I round a row of trees, and in a clearing up ahead stands an elderly couple, clearly arguing over a tree.

“Well, the one you favor is too wide, and we don’t have enough ornaments to decorate it,” the husband tells his wife.

“Steve, we’ve been hosting Christmas for fifty years. We have enough ornaments to fill the Rockefeller tree!” She laughs, and they smile warmly at each other.

The farm has been somewhat dead today, the weekday crowd a thin one this early in December. I’ve spent a lot of my day cutting down pines on the outskirts of the property to drive back to the main area. Some of the customers who come to Palmers just want to pick an already trimmed and cut tree and then be on their way, rather than trekking through the acres to flag one of us down and wait for it to be brought up.

I was driving back here to see if there were any lookers I could bring up front as pre-cut trees, but these two look like they could use some help. Plus, for two people of their age, they’ve wandered awfully far to the back of the property.

“Can I help you two find a tree?” I ask while walking up.

“Young man, do you think this tree looks too tall? I’m thinking my husband will keel over trying to get it inside, and we’re celebrating our fiftieth anniversary this Christmas. I

don't want to miss out on that number." Her glassy eyes spark with amusement.

"Rita, it's like you're trying to jinx us." Her husband shakes his head, but it's clear he's enamored with her.

Surveying the tree, it's definitely too big for them to handle. But I'm not going to come straight out and say that.

"Hmm, I think this trunk looks crooked regardless, so we should probably find a different one."

An engine sounds in the row next to us, and I watch as Emily pulls up.

"Everything okay?" she asks, looking back and forth between the couple and me.

"Yes, dear, thank you. It's our fiftieth anniversary this Christmas and we want to pick out the perfect tree. We got engaged on a tree farm, didn't you know?" Rita, the wife, gives her husband a dreamy-eyed look as she drops this personal information on us.

I find it charming how they want to impart this story to us, and when I look over at Em, she seems smitten with them.

"You did? How sweet. Did he get down on one knee?" She dismounts the vehicle and walks to where the three of us are standing.

A red pom-pom hat sits atop her head, and that little burst of color on her makes it impossible not to stare.

"Of course I did! Had the ring on this little ornament I hung on the perfect tree. She cried immediately and I could barely get the words out, I was shaking so much. Fifty years and a lot of life since, and I'd do it all over again." Steve looks at his wife with adoration and love.

Rita waves him off like she's embarrassed but pleasantly charmed, and I can't help but fix my gaze on Emily. So many of our moments happened here on this tree farm, and in another life, maybe I'd have gotten down on one knee the same way Steve had.

“I see that look, young man. It’s exactly how I looked at my Rita while I was trying to convince her father to let me take her on a date. Hiding your intentions never gets you anywhere, even if they’re not wholesome.” Steve winks at me.

“Oh no, we’re not ...” Emily shakes her head.

Rita pats her arm. “It’s okay, dear. Sometimes we don’t want to admit out loud how we feel about these men because their egos are already big. But we both see you looking.”

They call us out like only people their age can, with zero filter or shame.

The four of us spend the next half an hour trekking through the rows of trees while Rita or Steve rule out this tree or that until we find the one they both agree on. It’s thirty minutes of the two of them imparting wisdom on us, and it’s the best time I’ve had in a long time.

It doesn’t escape me that it’s mostly because Emily is next to me while they talk about love and marriage.

As soon as we assist them to the front of the farm, Rita and Steve turn to bid us farewell.

“Thank you so much for helping us today. And remember, proposing at a tree farm is the way to go.” Steve winks at me as Em stands right at my side.

I swear, I might be blushing. “The pleasure was all ours.”

“That boy is smitten with you, don’t let him get away,” Rita whispers to Em, but she might as well be shouting.

The two of us are left standing there awkwardly as Charlie goes to help them string the tree to the roof of their car.

“Remember the year we convinced that total grinch to buy the biggest tree? He looked so happy.” Em smiles to herself, and I wish she were directing that expression at me.

God, she is so incredibly beautiful. I often find myself having to blink out of a trance around her.

“We were always a good team.” Turning away so she doesn’t see the double entendre all over my face, I walk to the

four-wheeler to go back out to the rows of trees.

“We were.” Her voice is quiet over the hum of the engine.

Maybe she doesn't think I heard it. But I did, and those two words do dangerous things to my heart, which is why I switch the engine off.

“After that day of work, we went out to Starlight Hill. Remember that?” Ducking my head as I face her, Em is having a hard time meeting my eyes.

“Of course I do.” She gulps.

Obviously, we're both thinking about that night, the one that took us from teenagers who were dating to something more. It was the night I fell in love with her, head over heels, and would have fought anyone to keep her forever. After a hard day's work at the tree farm, I asked Emily if she wanted to go up to Starlight Hill with me. The teenage make-out spot was notorious for our peers committing high jinks, and sure, I always wanted Em in that way, but I thought it would be romantic to see the stars and the lights of New York City on the horizon.

I never banked on her asking me to take her back to my house. But the moment we got under the stars, we'd collided. Our lips fused, my car windows fogged up, and by the time Em said she was ready for me to take her virginity, half our clothes were off. What she didn't know was that I'd never done that with anyone either.

I'll never get the look on her face when I told her out of my mind. She'd been shocked, emotional, and relieved, and we both agreed this was the way it was meant to be. Since my grandfather slept like the dead and I didn't want to have sex in the back of my truck for either of our first times, I took her back to my childhood bedroom.

That night ... God, it had been the singular best moment of my life. Not only in the way all teenage boys fantasize about sex, although, yeah, it was fucking awesome, but because it was with her. Emily Palmer was the girl of my dreams, and that night I felt invincible.

“I thought we were going to light that forest on fire.” Chuckling to myself, I try not to discern what she’s thinking.

Maybe I don’t want to know. If Emily isn’t thinking about that night the same way I always have, I couldn’t take it.

“Gosh, that night ...” As if unconsciously doing so, her fingers reach to her lips.

Like I might have tattooed mine on them all those years ago.

“Em, I really thought what we had was—”

The squawk of her walkie-talkie between us has Em jumping away from me.

“Em, I need you over here, the couple is requesting it.” Charlie’s voice comes over the radio.

Immediately, the moment we were having completely disappears. Her eyes widen, and I shut my mouth.

“Sure, be right there.” She radios back and then heads for her four-wheeler.

With a lingering gaze, Em fires up her vehicle and tears off through the rows of trees. Fuck, that had been too much.

I almost just told her that what I thought we had was it for me. That I wouldn’t have left her, not for anything. That I was so incredibly in love with her, I would have moved heaven and earth to make our relationship work during the college years.

But she had not had that same faith in us, as evidenced by her dumping me weeks before we left. I have to remember that, remind myself that Emily has never seen us as a couple who could go the distance.

And I’m not in any position to take the risk that she could now. My future depends on me being focused and disciplined. Distractions aren’t permitted, and that’s all this is.

It’s not like Emily ever thought we were endgame. Surely she wouldn’t think that now.

The words Mercer left unsaid ring in my ears, and I swear he was going to tell me that I was the one for him before Charlie interrupted on the radio.

What would I have said? It was the same for me? It still might be?

God, I'm an idiot. Part of me wants to go back in time and scream at eighteen-year-old Emily for being so dense. So insecure.

"Do you think the McGibbons are using growth hormones on their trees? I've heard rumors," Mom wonders aloud, and I can't help but snicker.

"Mom, if they're really taking this competition so seriously that they're doping their Christmas trees, then I don't want to win." Butter and flour stick to my hands as I roll out a ball of sugar cookie dough.

She greases a cookie sheet and sends a smile my way. "That wouldn't be very Christmas spirit of us, now would it?"

"Maybe we should steroid test the entrants. Put it in the bylaws of the competition," I suggest sarcastically.

Mom points a finger at me. "Our family has been submitting trees to this competition since you were born, young lady. It's a holiday tradition."

I put my hand over my heart. "One I will take as seriously as a heart attack, I assure you. Right after I check the mistletoe for performance enhancing drugs."

She throws a paper towel in my direction, but it only floats to the counter that's covered in cookie ingredients. We've been at the baking process for hours now, a tradition that I cherish with my mother.

We spend two weekends in December baking enough cookies to feed an army or at least the entire town of Queenwood. Mom hadn't wasted any time lugging out the two mixers, various bags of flour, rolling pins, decorative sprinkles, and such this morning before I'd even woken up. Walking down to the kitchen was like entering a winter wonderland that smelled like chocolate and vanilla, and we've been at it ever since.

The thing with baking, though, is that the recipes for each cookie are so ingrained at this point I don't have to focus on them. And that means my mind keeps wandering back to the very frustrating coworker who kept giving me looks that felt as if they penetrated my soul. The words of Rita and Steve, the couple whose tree we helped pick, have also haunted me. It never escapes my notice that Mercer and I still give off this vibe of intense chemistry, and clearly, they could see it.

"Honey, can you refill the bowl of Hershey kisses?" Mom asks, interrupting my reverie.

Just as I'm about to reach for it, a bunch of noises comes from right outside the room.

"Hey, Ma." Charlie barges in through the door from the garage and comes around the counter, kissing our mother before he steals a chunk of chocolate chip cookie dough right out of the bowl.

"Gross." I smack his hand away. "You didn't even wash them."

"I did before I got in the car. We played a little hockey this morning at the rink." He flashes me a cocky smile, and I hate that my brother is always in a good mood.

Don't get me wrong, I'm a pretty positive person. But I'm never the one people choose to talk to first or rub elbows with. That's always been Charlie, he's like the mayor of any event,

and everyone seems to know it. I'm his prickly sister, and I don't know when that title was given to me or what I did to earn it, but I can't seem to shake my self-consciousness about it.

"Hey, Mrs. P." Mercer shoulders his way through the door, that big body consuming more than just space in the kitchen.

When he's in the room, it's impossible for me to look anywhere else. But especially right now, when he's in some type of hockey jersey and his hair is wet from sweat or a shower. Those burly shoulders and tapered waist check every box on my ideal list, and Mercer has always been the sexiest man I've ever seen. This attraction between us has never simmered; it's almost unfair how much I still want him.

"Hey." He settles next to me at the kitchen counter and looks down through those thick black lashes.

The way he lowers his voice, it's almost like that greeting is intended to mean more. I'm not sure if the animosity he showed me in the first few days back in our hometown has faded, but we've not been trading barbs like we had. If anything, Mercer has been bringing up old inside jokes or including me in some of his and Charlie's antics during work hours.

As much as I regret breaking us up, I've missed the dynamic of our friendship trio more. Now that I've seen glimpses of it, I'm clamoring for more.

"Boys, if you get washed up, I'll let you taste test these raspberry thumbprints," Mom offers and nods toward the sink.

Immediately, they wrestle each other for who will get to wash his hands first. Even if they're boneheads, it warms my heart to see my brother with his best friend. Like he mentioned, it took some time after things with Mercer and I had gone south. Charlie deserves to have this kind of relationship in his life, and the guilt still fills my gut when I think about how I almost lost it for him.

"Is your knee recovered enough for you to play hockey?" I ask Mercer as he takes a seat at the counter.



The nurse's point-of-view in me is always curious about anything having to do with medicine.

He pops a cookie in his mouth and grins. "Worried about me, Em? Don't worry, I've done months of rehab, and the doctors say I look good as new. I'm already outrunning these fools in my private training sessions, a little bit of hockey won't hurt. Plus, when Charlie says hockey, he means the two of us trying trick shots into the net."

"And let me tell you, neither of us was made for ice sports." Charlie snickers. "Stick to soccer, my friend, or you'll never go pro."

"Ain't that the truth." Mercer takes another cookie and fist bumps my brother.

"What's going on with free agency, sweetheart?" Mom asks Mercer, and I know she worries about him.

My family has known Mercer since we were all little kids, and my parents couldn't be prouder of what he's accomplished. But without a lot of people in his corner, my mom and dad have always worried that he'll be taken advantage of. Even if he is smart and level-headed, which we've always known him to be, there are a lot of shady characters in the sports world. People who are just looking to make a buck off someone else's back.

"After my season ended, it wasn't looking good. The way I tore everything, the doctors and my agent weren't sure I'd even be able to play. I guess the commentators did give me some credit to getting my college team to the championship, even if I couldn't play in it. The draft was a surprise, but I'm trying to bounce back." I can tell that he's trying not to show emotion when talking about it.

But I'll never get the image of him going down on that field out of my head. It wasn't often that I watched Mercer's games; sure, I tried to avoid them but eventually caught clips online or someone would inevitably post a thirst trap of him. But that day, I'd been watching the online feed to pass the time. It was the twenty-third minute of the first half in one of their early season games. When he went to cut for the ball and

try to use the toe of his cleat to sink it into the corner of the net, he crumpled to the ground instead.

I'd screamed when it happened, and my roommate Zoe thought I'd hurt myself or something. Not in the physical sense, but my heart had broken on the spot. Soccer is Mercer's passion, it's his lifeblood, and it was so unclear in those minutes after what had happened that I feared the worst.

I watched the screen with rapt attention as he tried to stand and failed, his face twisted up in pure agony. When the trainers ran on, assessed him, and then carried him off, I felt tears coming down my face. If he could never play again, he'd be devastated.

News had come out via a world-renowned sports talk show later that night; Mercer Russell, predicted to go number one in the draft, had torn his ACL and MCL and was currently in surgery. I remember the sports pundits droning on and on about recovery rates and probabilities. They kept mentioning rehab and certain players who never came back after injuries like this. It scared me to death.

Only once Charlie texted our family group chat that he was out of surgery and the prognosis looked okay did I take a breath, but not a deep one. Part of me felt like I should have reached out then, but why the hell would Mercer want to hear from me?

My brother kept me clued in, mostly because he was filling my parents in, but it had taken months of assessments to rule out that Mercer would never play again. His injury had far-reaching consequences, though. He couldn't play for most of his senior season. His team made it to the championship and won, but without him. Which meant scouts saw nothing of his play, and teams didn't want to take a chance on a guy who was barely out of surgery for tearing both important ligaments in the knee.

He wasn't drafted.

The day felt like a lead weight around my neck, so I couldn't imagine what it felt like for Mercer. According to Charlie, he wouldn't talk about it. Only kept saying that he

would be picked up in free agency and was trying his damndest to make it happen. Since the draft was a blow he wasn't expecting, Mercer decided to stay until his college graduation rather than drop out to try to hustle for pro teams.

"Well, sure, we're all so excited to watch you make your return. Mr. P and I have plans to come down for your first pro game." Secretly, I knew it was so he could have someone familiar at his game since his grandfather couldn't travel well.

"That'd be so awesome." His face lights up.

"But what is your agent saying?" Mom pushes, and I know she's keeping this up because she thinks no one has sat him down for this conversation yet.

On the one hand, I want to know everything about his future plans. On the other, I wish I wasn't here for this. In a few short months, Mercer and I will be living different lives, our paths intersecting less and less. It's painful to hear how he'll be moving on, how he'll eventually establish his career. Put roots down. Maybe buy a house. Someday, he'll meet a girl and probably fall in love. The images move through my mind like a movie, and I just want to turn it off.

Mercer ruffles a hand through his hair. "He predicts I'll be picked up. He says for sure, but of course, I can't count on that. My stock has definitely taken a hit since my injury. I mean, we saw that with the draft. Teams will really be looking at my progress in private training or invites to their camps to assess if I'm still the same player. I'll show them I am, of course. But yeah, hopefully, it works out, and then it's just picking up and moving to my new city. I can't wait. I mean, it's a little nerve-wracking, like waiting for something you've thought about your whole life. But obviously, this is the job I want, this is what I want to do. I'm ready."

Looking down at my hands as they roll out dough, I keep quiet. I could listen to him talk for hours, and it's not often these days that I get to.

"Well, we hope you go somewhere on the East Coast so it's easier to visit. I'll have to come get you set up in whatever

house you buy in whatever city.” Mom pats his cheek like he’s one of her own.

Mercer chuckles. “You’re always spoiling me. I’ll be sad to leave Miami if that’s the case, but checking out a new city will be cool. Meeting new people, exploring new areas.”

New, new, new. It’s all I hear. Mercer is more than ready to flip the page and start a fresh chapter, and here I’ve been stuck in my head about the old one from the moment I saw him a week ago. I’ve been obsessing over the past, wishing I’d done it differently, while all he cares about is moving on from his old and current life.

Of course, that’s what he wants. No way has he been waiting around, hoping we’ll give it one more go. He probably wanted to say something completely different before Charlie interrupted us on the radio yesterday, and the rose-colored glasses I’ve been tinting everything with have led me astray.

We are all on the precipice of our next chapter, and it would be wise for me to remember that. In a year’s time, I’ll have to see Mercer’s name and picture everywhere, and maybe those pictures will feature a woman in them.

My nose burns with tears that make no sense, but I’ve been more emotional lately than I’ve ever been in my life. The perks of actually *feeling* again, rather than being so numb I couldn’t notice anything around me.

Except right now, I wish I could turn it all off. It would be easier with my biggest mistake always staring me straight in the face.

A college winter break in Queenwood wouldn't be complete if Genny didn't drag me out to all the dive bars in our hometown.

The tradition of traipsing out in the cold to places where our old classmates now serve alcoholic beverages behind sticky counters is one that my childhood best friend refuses to give up, even if I beg her not to make me go. Nothing about sitting in a building full of former playground peers gets me jazzed up, even if the idea of drowning my confusion in a glass of wine piques my interest right about now.

But alas, she's too persuasive, and I am too bored to sit at home, so here I am. Gen's faux fur coat leads the way into Baker's, a sports bar in the middle of town that boasts six televisions with various games and a deal on nachos and margaritas.

The bar is already packed with people, most of them peers of ours from school, and the DJ is spinning a two-thousands pop hit that reminds me of the time I had one too many wine coolers as a seventeen-year-old. Christmas decorations are strung up and down the bar while tinsel, streamers, and mistletoe hang from the exposed beams above. It's so cold outside that I think they're calling for snow, but there is some fake kind dusting the floor of this bar right now. I'm sure it'll be sticky and dirty by night's end.

"It smells like a teen clothing store in here." Gen waves a hand in front of her nose.

“That’s what you get for coming to a place where every twenty-something is trying to get laid by his high school crush. They’re drowning in cologne.” I shrug out of my coat because it’s already a furnace in this place.

Luckily, Gen finds us a table, and we place an order for two margaritas.

“Thanks for coming out tonight. I feel like we don’t get to see each other enough, and even if it’s at hometown bars, I’m glad we’re getting out.”

A warmth settles in my chest, and I reach for her hand. “Me too. I’ve missed you. I might even let you get me drunk enough that you get me out on the dance floor tonight.”

While I love music, I will never be the first one shaking my ass in the middle of the floor. Genny knows it takes me a good amount of liquor to get out there, and I have a feeling tonight she’s going to try to accomplish that.

“Oh, I’m definitely requesting that song we made up a dance to in eighth grade and dragging you out there.”

My palm hits my forehead. “Please, don’t remind me. I recall piggybacks being involved in that choreography.”

“Hope your back is still as good as it was when we were twelve.” She grins.

A gaggle of people pass our table, and one bumps into Genny’s chair.

“Laine? No way, I haven’t seen you in forever!” Gen jumps up from our high-top to hug a brunette with teal streaks running through her hair.

Laine Broadbent had been in a few of my classes and was decent enough, but we were never close. Gen, however, is like my brother in that she has this charming personality that endears her to everyone.

“It’s so good to see you! I didn’t realize you were home from your trip, I’ve been stalking your social media. It looked incredible,” Laine gushes, and I’m sure half our high school followed Gen’s once-in-a-lifetime study abroad trip.

Laine's friends Nicole, Kayla, and Erica walk over with two unfamiliar men and one guy I notice from high school. Maybe his name is Brian, but I can't remember. I think he's a few years younger than us, but there are too many people from too many grades of my high school in here to keep all of them straight.

"Hey, how are you guys?" We all greet each other and then stand awkwardly for the second it takes for small talk to kick in.

"So, you guys home until January, too?" I ask, going for the easy topic of conversation.

"Yep. My family is going to Florida for Christmas, so that'll be fun." Erica sips her drink, shifting her eyes around.

Nicole and Kayla seem to be all over the two guys I don't know, and I assume they are boyfriends from college or something.

"Is your brother here?" Laine asks.

Vaguely, I remember Charlie having a thing with her sometime in our teens, but that doesn't surprise me. My brother is, as I said, *popular*. Not that I want to think about his love life or other scandalizing things, but he had a lot of girls who he *talked to* in high school. Being home for winter break, especially in this bar, it wouldn't surprise me if a bunch of people act on their little winter break fling ideas.

"He's around here somewhere, I think." I hadn't checked in with him before going to meet Gen at her house.

Although he convinced Dad to pick us all up around midnight by promising he wouldn't drink and drive. Leave it to my brother to get our parents to taxi our drunk asses around.

"You guys see that Mercer Russell is here?" one of the guys speaks up, his eyes shifting across the room.

"Yeah, we went to high school with him." Erica smirks like she's close to him or something.

Internally, I roll my eyes. I hate it when people throw his celebrity around like they know him to make themselves look

cool. But my teeth clamp into my tongue when Gen eyes me like she knows what I want to say.

“He’s supposed to be the next superstar of the American soccer world, and he’s just right here in this bar. Damn shame about his knee, that whole being passed over in the draft thing was insane. No one saw that coming. Fucking wild. You think he’ll sign something if I ask him?” Unfamiliar guy asks again, and internally, I bristle.

I might not be with him anymore, I might not be his favorite person, but I’m still protective of Mercer. Much of his life is already playing out in the media, and he can’t go many places without it being shown on social media. But this is his hometown, and he deserves to have a good night with friends while expecting privacy. This random guy is going to ruin that, and I know it bugs Mercer on some level. He told me, once upon a time, that all he wanted for an hour or two was to be left alone if that’s what he chose.

My gaze follows the guy’s finger, which is very obviously and shamelessly pointing at Mercer across the room. When I look over, two girls are practically hanging all over him and Charlie, and my heart lurches into my throat.

So much for looking out for him when I’m clearly not a thought that crosses his mind. Fuck, I am a sucker.

It’s not like he owes me anything, but it would have been nice to sit and chat with a drink tonight. To not watch some chick try to feel his abs under his shirt. The thought of him going home with someone makes bile collect at the base of my throat.

“I wouldn’t. He’s with his home friends. Be cool.” Gen rolls her eyes at the guy, and Nicole glares at her.

Doesn’t look like she likes my friend making fun of her boyfriend, but hey, Genny isn’t wrong.

“Yeah, he’s trying to lie low,” I speak up, not sure why, but it comes out just the same.

“Mercer is super chill, but agreed. If I go over to talk to Charlie, maybe you can come with me,” Laine tells Nicole’s



boy.

Unfortunately, I can't seem to pull my gaze from the soccer star in question, and he hasn't done anything to shoo away the girls buzzing around him. My mind floats to the conversation he had with my mom in the kitchen yesterday and how he said his next chapter was coming.

Is this just a preview of what I'll have to witness in the media when he's a pro athlete?

Because I've zoned out, I don't realize it when his eyes collide with mine until it's too late. The blue orbs blaze a path up my body, drinking in my skintight jeans and sweater as if to make me feel naked under their assessment. The corner of his mouth tips up and I get his dimple, the thing that always causes my knees to buckle.

Five minutes or so of small talk with the group pass by as I finish my margarita, and Mercer still won't stop staring at me. Our connection sizzles through the throngs of people and the thump of the music. My skin feels too tight and hot, my lungs won't work correctly, and my core throbs like I haven't been brought to orgasm in years. Honestly, not since him has it been done properly.

Feeling agitated, a little tipsy, and like I'm about to fall into something stupid, I turn and excuse myself from the group. I'm trying to head across the bar to the bathroom when someone stops me. Diane, a girl from my childhood soccer team, wants to know how my parents are doing. But before I can answer, a hand molds to the small of my back.

"Hey, I need to talk to you."

Mercer's deep timbre tickles close to my ear, and I physically shiver, though I'm hoping neither he nor Diane notice. Give me one margarita, and I'm apparently putty in this man's hands. Oh, who am I kidding? I melt for much less over him.

"Oh, Mercer, hey!" Diane's smile increases tenfold.

"Good to see you. Will you excuse us?" He flashes a good-natured smile at our old classmate and then steers me in the

other direction without an answer.

“What’re you doing?” I’m confused when he pulls me into a darker, less crowded corner of the bar.

Everyone can still see us over here, but they probably can’t hear us. Still, I’m sure someone will pick up on the fact that two exes are having a hushed conversation.

“Em, cut the shit.” His body vibrates with seriousness.

“I’m not doing anything.”

One of those big hands lands on my hip so he can lean into me, and every cell in my body is on high alert. My nipples stiffen, my core clenches with anticipation.

“You wouldn’t stop looking at me. And I can’t stop looking at you. Listen, I just ... I can’t not say anything anymore.”

Fear, desire, hope, and so many other things swirl around in my stomach. The effect has me dizzy, and I press forward, inching closer to Mercer to make sure I don’t miss anything he says. But he stays quiet, and suddenly, I’m in my own head. All the things I’ve wanted to tell him for years are jumping out at me, and the tequila in my system is betraying the silence I’ve sworn to keep.

“I ... I should have told you years ago ...” The words stick in my mouth like peanut butter, and suddenly my jaw stops working.

Mercer holds my gaze, the intensity notching up until I almost can’t stand it. He opens his mouth like he’s going to tell me to continue. Our bodies are nearly pressed together, the heat of his hand seeps past my jeans into my skin, and the attraction between us has reached def con levels. Nearly four years of not being able to express my true feelings for this man, and I’m crumbling.

Mercer’s eyes land on my lips, and I realize I’d press my mouth to his in a heartbeat. But some of the noise from the bar filters past my dulled senses, and suddenly, I realize we’re in plain view of a crowd of people. If this is going to happen, if

the complicated nature of *us* is going to be addressed, I don't need anyone else gossiping or weighing in.

Anxiety grips me by the throat, and scenarios flash through my mind. Mercer using me for a winter fling. Mercer fucking me only to one-up me for breaking up with him. Mercer pursuing me and then deciding we're over once he goes back to school.

Air. I need air.

Whirling away from him, I make it to the closest exit door and keep walking. My feet and mind have no idea where they're taking me; all I know is that I need to get away from my ex-boyfriend. Before I spill my guts or before he shoots me down.

Frigid air slams into my bones, but I barely notice it as I stalk across the uneven pavement.

My name is being shouted across the parking lot, and I'm so overheated from what almost happened that I don't realize my coat is back in the bar. A hand snakes out and gently grasps my elbow, and then I'm slowly turned until I'm standing nearly chest to chest with Mercer.

He's so damn tall, so damn handsome, so damn attentive to me. It's bound to make me break.

"What were you about to say back there?"

The intensity of his voice has my stomach in knots and my heart whining with the need to express itself.

"It's dumb, Mercer." I sigh out of embarrassment and frustration.

Even with only one drink in me, the alcohol is loosening my tongue, and I can't keep a hold on myself if he keeps getting me alone and looking at me the way he does.

"And yet I still want to hear it." That big hand slides down until it holds my wrist and he's drawing circles on my palm.

The tingles it leaves race up my arm, down my spine, and pool low in my core. I have to actively try not to thrust my

hips the tiniest bit because all they want is to seek the promise in that one motion of his hand.

“I was going to say that ...” I’ve lost the battle—the words are already coming out. “I was trying not to tell you that breaking up with you was the biggest mistake of my life. That if I’d just had a little more faith, I wouldn’t have so many regrets.”

Aquamarine eyes flash into mine, the shock and fury combining until I can’t pick his emotions apart. Mercer radiates an energy that borders on aggressive, and his big body walks mine backward until I can’t go anywhere. Until my back is pressed against the brick wall outside of the bar.

Those thick, blunt-tipped fingers slip under my chin until I’m forced to look up at him.

“I’ve thought about kissing you for three and a half years. There are nights I dream so vividly about you being in my bed that I wake up and almost think it was real. Sometimes, it’s like I see glimpses of you and try to chase you down, but it’s always someone else. I’ve wondered endlessly what life would be like if you never left me. If I got to hold on to you, would we be getting ready to live in the real world together?”

Mercer isn’t letting any morsel of truth go unsaid. He’s throwing it all out there, placing it down like a gauntlet. All these words we’ve avoided, the honesty I’ve tried to avoid, it’s between us now, and I’m reeling from it.

This conversation, our proximity, seems so surreal that I almost want to pinch myself to make sure it’s real. Mercer’s one hand is still on my jaw, sliding up to palm my cheek, while his other wraps around my waist. My arms snake around his neck of their own volition, and my inner schoolgirl is squeeing that I’m back in his arms.

His lean into me is slow and deliberate. It leaves my heart beating wildly where he presses those fingers to my pulse, and my knees practically shake with anticipation. The minty smell of his toothpaste mixes with the sharpness of the whiskey he was drinking, and I know I’m about to get a taste of danger when our mouths meet.

The first slide of his lips over mine is a reckoning, bringing everything crashing down on my head as we kiss for the first time in three and a half years. Passion and missed time are interwoven in every testing taste of our mouths, and my eyes flutter shut with how perfect this is.

My God, this man knows how to kiss. He always has. It's like he's reading my mind and body before I even know what I want. Curving his lips, tilting his head, stroking our tongues together. With just the right amount of pressure and variation, his mouth keys my body up, and I quiver without thinking. A moan escapes my throat and echoes in his. Mercer reciprocates with a growl, the vibration of it making my thighs clench.

Hands in hair, bodies grinding against one another, the make out speeds up until I'm nearly panting. I'm ready for more; my hands are on his zipper, even if we're in full view in this public parking lot, and then—

He stops me. His hands pull mine away. Our mouths disconnect. My heart slams into my chest, and I'm shell-shocked by how quickly he stomps on the brakes.

“We should ... let's take a minute.” Mercer is breathing heavily, his eyes still closed as he presses his forehead to mine.

If he asked me to get in the back seat of his car right now, I would. I'm a live wire, all my feelings and emotions on my sleeve, and he's the one slowing us down. It's hard not to feel the thorn of disappointment bristle under my skin.

Not that I don't think it's a good idea. This is Mercer and me, after all. There is enough baggage to fill this bar. Jumping into something so hastily is a bad call.

But it doesn't mean a part of me doesn't want him to be so carried away, so enamored with me that he says fuck it all.

“Yeah.” My voice is a breathy whisper.

“It's just ...” He doesn't finish his thought.

“Yeah,” I agree again, even though I'll agree to nearly anything he proposes right now.

“Let me buy you another drink.” Backing up a step, I get a full-frontal view of Mercer trying to adjust himself in his pants.

That makes me smirk, and I hear him snort as my gaze glues to the tent of his jeans. “More alcohol might lead to something we can’t control.”

“I can barely control myself now, Em. But this thing is ... delicate. Let’s just take a pause.”

When he offers me his hand, I take it, not wanting to pass up the chance to touch him once more. There are so many words left to say, but tonight probably isn’t the time.

For the first time in over three years, I kissed Mercer Russell. I kissed the ex-boyfriend who occupies my thoughts endlessly. Whose face I dream about more than anything or anyone else. That’s progress enough.

If we’re meant to hash this out, it will happen over this winter break.

Still, as we enter the bar and continue to mingle and party with friends, the electricity between us never dulls. I’m left with an ache in my chest, in my body, and the ghost of his lips tattooed over mine.

And the knowledge that everything between us has changed for another countless time.



## MERCER

**T**he morning after kissing Emily in the parking lot of Baker's, we're all back on the farm bright and early.

Weekend days in December are so few, and it's when the biggest turnout of people come to cut their trees down. Between work and school schedules, it's a no-brainer why Saturdays and Sundays draw a massive crowd in and out of the Palmer Tree Farm gravel lot. It just means we have to work off our hangovers or late-night winter break hangouts in the freezing cold while doing manual labor.

I can't complain; there is something nostalgic and purely Christmas about helping the residents of Queenwood find their tree. I've been doing this for so long—since I was a kid—that most people are familiar faces. There is a camaraderie working here, both with the customers and the regular seasonal staff.

But before that, because I'm a masochist, I decide to get up and work out in the dingy exercise room I built in my grandpa's basement when I was a teen.

Somewhere around freshman year of high school, I started to get seriously scouted. My height shot up, I started to work in the weight room a lot more, and the travel team I switched to was one of such caliber, the junior national team took players from it. Soccer has always been something I've been passionate about, but in my high school years, it was taken to the next level.

When I found out that a university in Miami wanted to offer me a scholarship and place on their team, it was the



biggest day of my life. Not only could Grandpa rest easy that my education would be paid for, but the athletic program I was about to go through was one of the best in the country for my sport.

Throughout college, I've been approached by agents, sponsors, professional-level coaches, and doctors who want to work with me. I've been extremely picky and tight-lipped about who I'll consult with, and both Grandpa plus the Palmers have been essential in helping me keep my head on straight.

I think about this past season as I rack weights onto my deadlift bar. All the equipment down here is secondhand or thrifted, but it works just the same. Grandpa let me set it up when I was trying to bulk up to impress the scouts throughout the years.

Now, daily workouts are essential to get me to the next level. If I'm not in peak physical shape, the next guy will be, and I want to be signed with a team after losing out in the draft.

The fact of that still burns me up inside, the way I saw my dreams vanish in front of my eyes because of my fucking knee. As if my own body had betrayed me. Working out like this lets me push past them, in a way, and I'll never take my own strength for granted again. I'm not the same cocky, invincible college player I once had been.

My muscles ache as I position myself under the equipment, the reps I've already done straining my energy. But I have a plan on my phone that my trainer sent home with me for winter break, and I have to follow it. No one is going to make you accountable as a pro athlete; you have to want it for yourself more than anyone does for you. That's who rise to the top.

Knee sore, quads on fire, I bend over to grab the metal bar. The cold stings my hands, the heat in this part of the basement nonexistent, especially at the crack of dawn in December. Rep after rep, I push air out of my lungs. My muscles burn with use, but I keep at it until I get to the number required.

Sweat beads my brow as I set the bar on the rack, and I gulp down some water to recover. It's been months since my injury and rehab, and my knee feels good. The surgery was top-notch, and I've pushed myself to power through recovery.

I feel strong, stronger than I ever have, and my mind is in the exact place it needs to be. Sports are as mental as they are physical, and I've been doing everything possible to up my game going into the league season.

The shrill ring of my phone cuts through the rock music in my headphones, and I hit receive before thinking about it.

“You lifting right now?”

My trainer's voice comes through the phone, and I chuckle because this is such a Tim thing to do. Leave it to my private strength and conditioning coach to not care that it's five in the morning, and some people might not be awake enough for a call. The dude does his first workout, meditates, and answers all his client emails by four thirty or some shit. He's insane to most people, but he's taken my fitness to the next level, so clearly, his method of madness works.

“How'd you know? Did you develop telekinetic abilities and not tell me?” I really wouldn't be surprised if he had.

“Working on that one.” Tim chuckles, and I picture him downing a glass of green juice. “But no, I need to know you're serious while at home, and this answers my question. You're doing your every other day cold plunges, right?”

I grumble, knowing I've slacked on those. “I work my ass off on a frigid tree farm nearly five days a week, doesn't that count?”

“No, although that's so small-town cute.” He mocks me, and all I imagine is his perfectly tanned self standing on his million-dollar balcony overlooking South Beach.

“Come through and see how small town it is after you lift your first seven-foot Douglas fir.” The boast is a half-joking challenge.

“Honestly, not a bad way to get some more exercise and endurance in. But you need to be doing those cold plunges.

They'll help your recovery and are great for the tissue in your knee. Even though you've said you feel fully rehabbed, in my professional examination of athletes I've worked with, there is still weakness there months after. You've got a huge season ahead."

Tim is a pretty intense guy, but like I said, his methods work. It was a risk going with a private coach instead of using someone the university offered, but if I want to go pro, I'll need all the help I can get. Not only does Tim know how to kick my ass, but just the mention that I'm working with him tells pro clubs that I'm taking this seriously.

"Couldn't ask for anything more. Don't worry, I'm following your plan. I'll be back in Miami in about a month, and then we'll start workouts again?"

"You bet. This time, I'm going to get your meditation up to one-hour increments." His voice is all business.

I shudder. "My mind goes nuts at five minutes, Tim, but sure."

I haven't mastered the art of meditation at all, despite how much he wants me to try.

"All right, kid. Finish up, then get a good breakfast in. Try to add some green juice into your diet, yeah? You won't always be a young buck."

Tim is constantly on me about my nutrition, but I like junk food a little too much. If I work it off in the gym, I give myself permission to go a little crazy in the kitchen.

"Have a good holiday, man. Talk soon."

I hang up with him and power through the rest of my sets, my mind waking up as my body burns through the exercises.

An hour later, and still at the crack of dawn, I'm at Palmer Tree Farm, working my ass off in the cold.

"Did you get any of Mom's apple streusel?" Charlie asks as he lugs a tree up onto the platform.

Together, we shove it through the netting apparatus, and he cuts it off with a box cutter and then ties the bottom.

“No, I didn’t realize it was in the break room. That’s one of my favorite things she makes.” My stomach rumbles just thinking about it.

“She’s testing a new recipe for our Christmas dinner, and I’m more than happy to try every variation.” He grins.

My heart aches, for a second, for the mother I never had. Grandpa tried hard through the years to create our own traditions. We decorated the tree together, went to church on Christmas Eve, and made the seven fishes dinner like his mother used to. But our holiday was always small, and even if I had love in my life, there was something about good old Saint Nick coming down the chimney that made me feel lacking.

It’s times like this that I realize Charlie and I are just different and always will be; he knows nothing but warm pies and a mother’s love during Christmas. And well, I don’t.

I also know what it’s like to kiss his sister in secret and not tell him whatsoever, but I can still lie to myself and say it’s for his own good. Last time everything blew up with Emily and me, my friendship with Charlie caught some of the shrapnel. I don’t want to tell him anything in case this isn’t going anywhere, or worse, goes south.

Still hasn’t stopped me from looking around every damn pine tree for Em this morning. We left the bar separately last night after flirting our faces off after that kiss. It was self-preservation that had me going home alone, but it doesn’t mean I liked it.

“Honey, you have to stop trying to climb the trees.”

A frustrated voice groans through the branches a few rows back, and I go in search of it. I’ve worked here long enough to recognize the frustration of a customer. As special as a lot of families want this outing to be, picking a tree is often difficult and a hassle. It’s why the people who work here try to make it as seamless as possible.

When I round the corner, a young mother is trying to assess the price tag of a five-foot tree, and two little girls run

circles around her legs while almost falling to the snowy ground.

“Can I help you with something?” I make my presence known, and the woman turns around.

“Oh gosh, I’m sorry. They’re just off the wall today and my husband is at work. This is the only day this month I can get out to get a tree, so of course, they probably sense it and are acting out.”

She gives her girls a stern look, but the older one is currently trying to hit the younger one in the face with a branch.

Kneeling down, I put on my best “I’m your friend” smile.

“What are your names, beautiful girls?”

One of the little girls dashes behind her mom’s legs while the other all but pounces on me.

“I’m Haley, and that’s Joelle. She’s still a baby, so she’s shy, but I’m not afraid of anything. Not even the dark!” Her toothless grin and explanation have me chuckling.

“Well, it’s good to meet you, Haley. I’m Mercer, and I’m still a little afraid of the dark. Now, what’s the problem? Are you making it hard for your mom to pick out a Christmas tree?”

The little girl rolls her eyes, and I have to bite back a belly laugh because, damn, she’s going to be a force to be reckoned with.

“It’s just so boring. They all look the same, and there aren’t even lights on them or presents underneath!”

“Didn’t Mom tell you?” I look up at her mother and wink, and the woman mouths a relieved *thank you*. “You have to help pick the tree and be on your best behavior, because Santa is actually watching right now. He only brings presents to put under the tree you pick if you help Mom.”

Haley’s mouth forms a little *o*, and then she stands up straighter as she whispers, “Do you think Santa knows what I want?”

“Did you write him a letter?” I whisper back.

She nods her head emphatically. “I told him I want a dollhouse, and then a princess dress-up set, and some new games on my tablet, and a blanket with strawberries on it, and ...”

Haley keeps naming gifts, but I notice a shift out of the corner of my eye.

“I want a tea set.” Joelle comes out with a guarded look on her face.

“I used to love playing tea with my dolls.”

Glancing over my shoulder, I see Emily standing there, smiling down at the little girl. She’s fresh-faced and glowing, and all I want is a moment alone with her. The way she’s looking at me while I talk to these little girls doesn’t escape my notice, and my desire to kiss her is so overwhelming I have to bite down on my tongue.

“Can we help you pick a tree?” Emily directs her attention to the mother.

“That would be so helpful.” She nearly weeps.

“Can you give me a piggyback ride?” Haley asks me out of nowhere.

Looking to her mom for confirmation it’s okay, she nods, and I turn so she can climb on.

“Joelle, would you like a ride as well?”

“Will you carry me?” she asks shyly.

I flourish my hands like I’m their butler or something. “At your service, madams.”

Both girls giggle, and now I’m hunkered down in little giggling girls who are both strangling me and pulling my hair at the same time.

Emily and their mother walk alongside each other as I hear Em explain each kind of tree and its pros and cons to her. Every few seconds, the girl I’ve loved since we were teenagers

looks back and gets this dopey smile on her face, watching me with Haley and Joelle.

“Do you want a princess crown?” Haley interrupts the silent conversation Em and I are having.

“Of course. What colors you got?” I play along.

“Either diamond or rainbow,” Joelle speaks up.

“Oh, rainbow, please. I think both of you should wear diamonds because you sparkle so brightly.” My voice conveys how serious of a choice this is.

The group of us stops at a tree so perfect for the little family, and the mother declares we’ve found it within seconds. I set the girls down as I go to get a saw and then return to quickly cut it down for them so their mother doesn’t have to do any work while trying to corral the girls.

“Thank you for cutting down our tree, Mr. Mercer!” Haley throws her arms around my legs after I load the saw and tree onto the four-wheeler.

“You’re so welcome. Thank you for my princess crown. Now, you guys be good for your mom so Santa can bring those presents, okay?”

Joelle nods and gives me a thumbs-up while Haley dances around in her boots, singing some made-up version of a song to a Christmas tune.

Next to me, Em is practically melting. Now, I understand that whole pickup strategy of using a baby or kid to talk to women. Clearly, this is doing something for her.

One of the other seasonal workers offers to check them out, and we bid the two girls and their mother adio as they thank us profusely.

Which leaves me standing in a clearing, out of sight, with Emily.

My face splits into a smile; how can it not when I’ve been thinking of nothing but how giddy and boyish she makes me feel. Em returns the expression, and we start to laugh because this seems delirious that we can’t stop grinning at each other.

Somewhere in the distance, Mrs. Palmer calls our names, and I turn to get back to work. The last thing I need is Em's family finding out that we're circling around each other like mating animals, especially on the clock. It's not like I know what we're doing, and lumping more people into our complicated dynamic will only end badly.

*"Wait."*

All of a sudden, my arm is being pulled back toward her, and I'm moving. Only when I turn to Emily do I realize she's already up on her toes and coming at me.

I catch her, lifting her off the ground, as her legs come around my waist and her mouth covers mine. Her nose is cold, but her lips are so warm and plush as I push past them with my tongue.

We're hidden in the trees, our large coats and boots getting in the way of our make-out session, and it's oh so good. It's a callback to the sneaking off we used to do as teenagers when we were horny out of our minds. Fuck, I guess I still am when it comes to this woman.

Her mouth is fused to mine, the air we breathe passes back and forth, and a groan works its way from my throat when she bites down on my lip.

"Seeing you with those girls was ... Mercer, are you trying to make my knees go weak?" She shakes her head like she's scolding me.

"Turned you on, huh?" I raise an eyebrow cockily.

She pushes at my chest but remains close. "It shouldn't be so attractive that you're a natural with kids."

"But it is. Apparently, you find me very attractive." Again, the arrogant edge of my voice has Em rolling her eyes.

I take that opportunity to swoop back in for another kiss, our arms tangling around each other in desperation to get closer. Here, in broad daylight, I want to take her to the ground and push myself inside her. I want to watch her eyes roll back, hear her moans, and bring us to the brink of insanity because that's how she makes me feel.



Except there is a little slice of fear at the back of my skull that has me breaking off our kiss with a gentle peck.

“We need to talk about this.” My head spins, and my cock might as well be cursing at me.

If I said so, Emily would probably follow me to the break room right now. Or my truck. Or her house just up and over the hill. We could undress each other, and I could sink inside her tight, warm folds like I’ve dreamed of doing for so many years. I want her so fucking desperately that my body protests me stopping this, but it’s necessary.

“Mercer.” Her tone is a warning.

“I’m not messing around when it comes to you.”

If she says she *is* messing around, it’ll gut me.

Those gorgeous hazel eyes shift to the side. “Things between us have always been complicated, huh?”

We can’t seem to keep away from each other, no matter how imminent the threat of hurting one another is. From the moment I took this job, before I even flew back to Queenwood, I knew I’d be tangled up in her by winter’s end. It was inevitable.

I just have to figure out how to stop it from breaking this time.

“Emily? Mercer?” Mrs. Palmer shouts again, and I know we have to get back.

“Later. Let me take you somewhere. We’ll talk about this.” I’m asking, but the words don’t come out as a question.

After a beat, Em nods. “Yeah, okay.”

I won’t start anything with her without clarity on what happens when Christmas and New Year’s is over. Because I certainly don’t want us to be, and it’s time to lay it all on the line. I’m dangling on this precipice, and I might as well take the chance on blowing up my whole life before a new chapter starts rather than leaving unsaid words and regrets in the one I’m bringing to a close.

Laying one last kiss on her lips, I squeeze her hand twice and then take off in a sprint in the direction of her mother's voice.

Behind me, I hear her chuckle at my boyish antics. Inside, my heart feels like it's floating with anticipation of what's to come.



**O**ne second, I'm making myself a tea in the break room of the barn, and the next, a thought comes flitting into my head.

This is how it always happens. I'll be alone in the silence, trying to be positive and work on the mind exercise techniques that I've read about when an unwanted, awful thought invades my brain. It'll be something from my past I'm not proud of or maybe a flashback to the week of my breakup. Maybe it's the scene I walked in on when Rich was in that bathroom at the party. Maybe it's the looming conversation I'm supposed to have with Mercer and what that means for the rest of this winter break. Or how we fit into each other's lives for the foreseeable future. Whatever it is, that thought poisons my brain against me and starts a spiral of epic proportions.

Next comes the sour feeling in my stomach, the impending doom crushing down on my chest. My fingers tingle, and my mind feels like it's on a Tilt-A-Whirl. The only thing I can focus on is that awful thought, relive it again and again, and make up worse scenarios. My vision goes blind to everything else except that moment and the feelings associated with it.

Fumbling with the teacup, I try to focus on sucking in air and closing my eyes. I need to stop going down this path of negative thinking, but it's not that easy. Once the anxiety attack takes hold, I can't get out of its clutches with anything else but my emergency anxiety medication. Which is currently at my parent's house, and I'm nearing the end of the workday at the tree farm.

The only thing worse than not having my meds on me is alerting any of my family or coworkers that I'm currently in the midst of an anxiety attack. Sure, mental health is a much less taboo topic today than it ever has been, but this is still embarrassing to me. The fact that my mind turns against me at the drop of a hat, or that I can't control it enough to function? It makes me burn with shame, even though I know I shouldn't. My mental health issues feel like a failing of some sort or that I'm weak. Of course, so many people out there would tell me the exact opposite, but when I'm already in the midst of an anxiety attack, further negative thoughts are what crowd into my mind.

"Emily. Emily, look at me."

Out of nowhere, Mercer appears at my side, and I clutch on to his triceps to remain upright. Wordlessly, I look up at him with pleading eyes. I wish he could make this stop, and I wish I could stop these attacks from coming on out of nowhere.

"Hospital, do you need the hospital?" His face fills with fear, and his voice edges on panic.

Shaking my head, I try to take a breath. "Just need to sit. Anxiety attack."

I feel lightheaded as he steers me toward a folding chair, and my chest begins to heave from the lack of good breaths I'm taking.

"Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth with me." Mercer sits beside me, stooping down so he can look me straight in the eyes.

I'm hanging on to his arms for dear life, like they might stop this. And I try, I really try, to mimic his breathing patterns. But nothing he does is helping.

"I can't ... I want ..." The more I try to talk, the more I begin to cry.

Hysteria takes over, and I feel like I can't get my lungs to work. Harsh gasping noises come from me, and then I'm being lifted.

“Where am I taking you?” Mercer’s voice is all business.

“Home.” The word is wheezed from my lips.

Swiftly, he takes the back exit out of the barn and hurriedly walks a path that keeps us out of view of mostly everyone on the farm. I lean into his chest as he carries me like a bride over the threshold and try to concentrate on breathing as Mercer all but runs us over the hill to my family home.

“I’ve got you, Em. I’m not going to let anything happen to you.” He presses his lips to my forehead as he run-walks.

Scrunching my eyes closed, I let the cold wind cool the sweat on my face. It’s below freezing, but my body is burning up, the anxiety making every nervous gland secrete sweat.

The minute we’re in my parent’s house, Mercer whisks me up the stairs to my bedroom. He’s been in there too many times to count, it’s no mystery how easily he finds it now.

“What do you need?” He sets me down on my bed and looks me in the eyes.

“I need ... I have ... on the dresser, my pills.” I point to my dresser, the mirror edges filled with pictures of my friends and me in high school.

Mercer moves swiftly, and I lie back, trying to control myself as I look up to the ceiling. He pours one out in his palm and holds it out to me. Dry swallowing the pill with my lack of oxygen proves difficult, but I can’t even wait for water at this point.

“What else can I get you? Water? A cool rag? Let me help you take this off.”

I hold up a hand to stop him, to tell him that I need to wait for the medication to set in, but he’s not paying attention. Those strong hands help lift me to remove the puffy down coat, my mittens, and eventually my boots and socks. Gentle fingers pull my sweaty hair off my nape, and he pulls back the covers to gingerly lift me into the bed and under them.

Being tucked in by Mercer Russell is something I should be astutely aware of, but this anxiety attack is still running

rampant.

It takes a good twenty minutes for the hydroxyzine to kick in, but when it does, my breathing starts to return to normal. I can finally regulate some of my emotions and stop the whirlwind in my mind. And my eyelids droop, the calming effect of the drowsiness setting in.

“I’m all right. It’s starting to work. You can take off,” I tell Mercer, wholly mortified and unable to look at him.

He doesn’t answer. The only thing I hear is the creak of my bed as the side I’m not lying on dips, and then I’m being pulled into strong arms.

“I’m not going anywhere. Rest.” Those protective words are a different kind of medicine, one I didn’t know I needed.

I should argue with him. I should tell him he doesn’t have to stay. Once I wake, I know he’ll want to talk about this, and it’s the last thing in the world I want to reveal to him.

But sleep is taking me, the comfort and warmth of his arms too good to pass up. So I close my eyes and drift off, knowing there is nowhere else on earth I’d rather be than here with him. Even if it took a horrible thing to get me here.

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**T**he sun has gone down, and the sky is dark by the time my eyes flutter open.

My room is quiet save for a soft breath on my forehead, and I realize I’m lying on my bed with someone else.

*Mercer.*

The afternoon rushes back up at me, the memories surfacing, and I cringe at how embarrassing it is to have him see me like this. But he didn’t leave. He’s right here, taking care of me when I don’t deserve his kindness.

“What time is it?” I croak, my throat full of sleep and grogginess.

His deep voice is hushed as he curls himself around me further. “Past midnight.”

“Jesus.” That anxiety attack did a number on me.

Goose bumps begin to rise on my arms as Mercer strokes little circles over my long sleeve, and it feels delightful after the over-stimulation of the anxiety attack.

“When did it start? The anxiety?”

Mercer’s voice is clouded with some emotion I can’t read, husky and quiet in the dark of the room.

“After my breakup.” The truth is the only answer I can give him.

I’m too tired to lie or deny right now.

While his arms are still around me, he turns his gaze to the corner of my room and feels a million miles away. “You were ... you were in love with him? The breakup hurt you that badly?”

It takes me a second to realize what Mercer is asking. In the dim light of my room, this man who I’ve given so much of myself to, who has given his all to me, thinks that some idiotic college fuckboy was the love of my life, and that’s why I’m messed up so bad.

“Mercer, no.” I scootch so that our bodies lie parallel to each other on my bed. “It’s not about him, at all. Well, I guess our breakup set it off, but I wasn’t in love with him. Our relationship ending is not what started the anxiety. It was that he cheated on me. I found him being physical with someone else.”

There’s only a split-second of shock on his face before fury transforms it. “I’ll end that motherfucker. Who the fuck does he think he—”

Placing a hand on his cheek, I silence him. “I ended it before anyone could even say the word. I’d never let someone treat me like that and continue to get away with it. But the fallout led to some mental health problems.”



“Do you get the anxiety attacks often?” His hand moves to my back and strokes up and down in a calming manner.

“No. They’re much better after getting on a daily medication, but sometimes it’s like one will slam into me and I can’t stop it. After I found out he cheated on me, things got really dark in my mind. It wasn’t about him, but about how I felt within myself. I blamed myself greatly, couldn’t seem to find my self-identity or worth, and spiraled wondering who I was in this life I’d built. How I allowed something like that to happen to me. It took me months to dig myself out, and the prescriptions helped a good deal. But it’s not a perfect fix. Mental health issues never seem to have that cure-all we’re desperately searching for.”

“I hate this. I hate it for you. I wish I could take away any pain he caused. You’re so ...” Mercer breaks off, his head turning to look at the ceiling before he speaks after a moment. “Em, you’re magnificent. Fuck any guy, you alone are this beautiful force. I’ve always been in awe of you. To think that you doubted, or doubt, any of that ... it kills me. You don’t deserve any of this.”

His words are a balm, and I want to burst into tears. I hurt him terribly during our last summer together, yet here he is, caring for me like he’d never let me go.

Suddenly, I recall the night we were supposed to have that I’ve now stomped all over, and my hand flies to my mouth.

“You wanted to talk. I’m so sorry I ruined that. Let’s do it now.”

A flicker of emotion passes over Mercer’s face before he shakes his head. “Stop, you need to rest.”

“I don’t. I want to talk about this.” I try to push up on one elbow, but he anchors me to the bed.

“You’ve just had a hell of an afternoon, and I don’t want to put any more weight on your shoulders. Just lie with me, Em.”

My heart drops with disappointment. As much as I was having anxiety leading up to that talk he proposed, I want to have the conversation. I told him I regretted breaking up with

him; he said he thought of nothing else but me our whole college existence, and now he's turning down the chance to talk about it.

I probably spooked him with how mentally fragile I am. Mercer doesn't need a head case like me weighing him down once he goes pro. Another sour feeling, dulled by the pill I'd taken, fills my chest at the thought that I've ruined any chance at reconciliation.

The negative self-talk in my brain tells me he doesn't want a girl who sinks into herself some days and can't seem to get out. It tells me that Mercer thinks I'm not ready for something new with him when I'm still hung up on my ex, even though it isn't. Those evil voices say that I've blown any chance at him forgiving me and wanting to be together again.

So I lie in his arms, but the whole thing feels a little more stifled than it did just minutes ago.

These thoughts in my head, words in my heart ... I was scared to let them out before. Now, all I want to do is pour them out to Mercer, but he doesn't want to hear them.

It feels like a deserved punishment that he's so close yet so far at the same time.



“**M**ake it stop, *please*.”

My brother’s pleas are barely heard over Genny’s belting, and I can’t help but laugh at their dynamic. We’ve been in the car for an hour and a half, and my friend has been singing Christmas pop songs at the top of her lungs since the car engine started.

“Oh, you know you love it. I heard you humming along after we got back in the car at the rest stop.”

In the passenger seat, Mercer sips the coffee he bought at said rest stop. He’s been uncharacteristically quiet on the drive, and I’m surprised he even agreed to carpool. Part of me thought he’d take his own car to escape me if need be.

It’s been a strained two days since the night of my anxiety attack, and we’ve barely been alone or spoken. I wasn’t quite sure he’d come on the annual snow tubing trip, seeing as he hasn’t attended in years due to our breakup. Yet he showed up this morning and threw his duffel in the trunk, and my heart hasn’t beat normally since.

Sharing a house with my ex, with whom I’ve very recently locked lips, and a bunch of booze is a recipe for disaster, but I’m not making wise choices when it comes to Mercer these days. In fact, this weekend feels like I’m inviting something catastrophic to happen. I just hope it’s the good kind of catastrophic—if that even exists.

“All I’ll say is that I’m fucking glad we’re ten minutes from the house or I’d throw your ass into a snowbank.”

Charlie winds us through mountain roads until it's nothing but trees and hidden driveways.

The annual snow tubing trip started when we were juniors in high school and has grown exponentially over the years. We always venture up to the Poconos for three days during the week so as not to miss the busy weekends at the tree farm. Charlie's friend Zach, from our high school, has a family house that's more like this enormous log cabin mansion, and his parents have always let us stay there. We spend the weekend tubing down the hills, going in the hot tub, playing beer pong, and getting up to whatever craziness everyone feels like. What started with eight or so kids from Queenwood has increased to twenty-five plus and includes college friends and partners. We've resorted to pooling air mattresses on the floor in the big living room so that people can have a place to sleep.

Yet another place that Mercer and I have history; we spent many a night locked in one of those bedrooms when we were together. It feels surreal to have him here now after his absence was felt for so many years, and I wonder if our powder keg is going to blow during this trip.

I woke up alone the morning after my anxiety attack to discover that my ex had slipped out sometime during the night. We haven't spoken to each other since, and I feel so ashamed and embarrassed that my mental weakness pushed him away. Clearly, he's changed his mind about having a talk about what's going on with us, and to say I'm mortified and heartbroken would be an understatement. What started as high hopes when he kissed me behind Baker's has suddenly turned into an awkward, silent stand-off, and I hate it.

But I'm trying desperately not to let it ruin this trip. I've always loved it here, out in the snow, the rush of the tube sliding down the mountain, time with friends. If Mercer no longer wants to try to reconcile or have a fling or whatever it is that's happening between us, then I can get over it, too. My heart feels forever stuck on him, but I can suck it up.

We pull up to the house, and there are already a bunch of cars in the circular driveway.

“Let’s unpack, get our gear on, and head to the mountain,” Charlie instructs us.

It’s still light enough that we could get a few hours of good tubing, and since we’re only here for two nights, we have to make the most of it.

“No wearing that gross green coat you did two years ago.” Gen makes a disgusted face. “It’s the color of baby poop.”

Charlie snickers. “On this, I’ll agree with you. I’m pretty sure Emily made me burn that coat after that winter.”

“It was hideous.” I shudder.

“Are we going to stand around talking, or hit the slopes?” Mercer pulls his snowboard out of the back.

“Should you be snowboarding?” I can’t help blurting it out.

Not only does he seem agitated, but he has an entire career to think about. Snowboarding on a rehabbed ACL and MCL could be detrimental, and I’d hate to see anything happen to set him back further for this season. I know that soccer is what Mercer wants to do with his life, and this seems foolish.

Everyone turns to me like I just stuck my foot in my mouth, and Mercer’s eyes squint in what looks like annoyance.

“I’m fine, thanks. I’ve been snowboarding for years and my knee is fully recovered. You don’t have to be concerned with me, Em.”

The way he says that last part makes it sound deeper than just snowboarding, and a pang of hurt reverberates in my chest. I know we didn’t get to talk about us, and I know he learned the truth about my breakup, but Mercer’s giving off this vibe that he’s pissed off at me. One second, he was in my bed telling me he’d take care of me anytime, anywhere, and now he can’t get away from me fast enough?

Color me confused.

Following everyone inside, I try to separate my feelings about Mercer from the ones of excitement for this weekend and concentrate on the latter.

“There’s my favorite C-cup!” A zany voice penetrates the vaulted ceilinged great room, and I look over to see a familiar face by the cavernous fireplace.

“Zoe!” I cry, unable to hold back my excitement at seeing my roommate.

She decided to come meet us on the trip at the last minute, taking an Amtrak train from DC on a whim. She came last year to experience our snow tubing extravaganza, and I couldn’t imagine this year without her.

“Oh my God, I missed you.” My pint-sized blond pixie of a roommate slams into me, and we embrace like we haven’t seen each other in years.

“Missed you more. I’m so glad you decided to come.”

Hugging someone who has been there for me in the darkest times is a comfort I didn’t realize I needed right now. Zoe was right in the thick of my depression and helped me hang on to hope when I couldn’t see it myself. If I hadn’t already thought so, I know she’s the forever kind of friend.

“Look what I made!” She gestures across the room, and my eyes land on a Christmas tree.

Except, there aren’t ornaments on it. No, the entire six-foot tree is decorated with mini bottles of liquor.

“We have to go level by level and finish them all by the time we leave!” She claps her hands together like the evil mastermind she is.

“Everyone in this house is going to get obliterated.” I shake my head at her nonsense.

“That’s the plan.” She beams. “How was the drive? What’s going on with that?”

She nods her head in Mercer’s direction, and he stomps up the stairs in the direction of the room we used to stay in.

“Ugh, it’s been ... well, you got my texts. We need to debrief but not in front of all these people.” Zoe understands me like no one else, and I need her take on this, but not now.

“He sure is gorgeous, especially when he’s pretending not to be in love with you.”

“Zo, you saw him for all of ten seconds.” She couldn’t possibly pick up on that.

My roommate shrugs. “The guy is like a heat-seeking missile to your pussy. I can feel the vibes from here. Through a locked door, even. I don’t need to meet him. You two are definitely fucking this weekend.”

My stomach trips over itself at her statement, and I know for a fact that my cheeks are scarlet. “Your mouth is going to get you in trouble someday, I swear.”

“Already has, babe. Speaking of vulgar mouths, you should just be glad I didn’t make a *pornament* tree like I wanted to.” Zoe wiggles her eyebrows.

I tilt my head. “A what?”

“A pornament tree, duh. A Christmas tree full of sex toys, maybe a couple of lewd pictures, definitely some dick memorabilia. The star at the top could be like a wedding cake topper, but it would just be people fucking. Maybe doggy style ...” She trails off like this is a design decision she’d actually have to contemplate.

I almost choke on my tongue. “Zoe, be fucking for real, you were not going to create that.”

“Um, yes, I was. When will I ever get the opportunity in the right setting to make a vulgar Christmas tree ever again?”

“Seems kind of sacrilegious.” A chuckle ripples out of me.

My roommate slings her arm around my neck. “Probably, but it would be fucking cool. And people could pluck the sex toys off to use together, solo, whatever they wanted.”

“There has to be some pleasure shop out there selling trees of that nature.” I’m joking, but my best friend’s face is dead serious.

“If not, they’re missing out on a real business opportunity. Lord knows your parents’ farm isn’t selling that kind of merchandise.”



I think my mother would keel over if she so much as saw a vibrator on one of our trees.

“But hell, then I realized we probably didn’t even need that. This is a ski trip with a bunch of college kids. We’re horny, in the hot tub, and there is enough spiked apple cider to get an elephant drunk. We’re all going to get down and dirty without any added innuendos.”

I roll my eyes at her ridiculous antics.

“Oh my God, is that a mini shot tree?” Gen bounces over to the two of us and hugs her arms around my neck.

“You know it.” Zoe winks at her.

“We have to do one now!” my childhood bestie cries.

“We haven’t even brought our bags in yet,” I point out.

Gen waves me off. “The boys will get them.”

Mercer might throw mine out in the snow, but sure. “Okay. But I refuse to do a tequila bottle.”

“Remember when you drank half a bottle of Jose Cuervo and nearly died?” Zoe teases as we make our way over to the tree.

Gen circles the pine to select her drink of choice as she giggles. “God, you never could hold your margaritas.”

I wish I could throw a snowball at both of their heads. “You two better not gang up on me this whole trip. And thank you for practically making me throw up in my mouth. Just the smell of tequila makes me want to vomit.”

Pretending to dry heave, I pluck a tiny bottle of cinnamon whiskey off the death tree and meet Gen and Zoe to form a little circle.

“Cheers. To a weekend of debauchery.” Zoe holds up her bottle.

“To heating up in the snow.” Gen smirks.

“You two are going to get me killed, aren’t you?” I groan.

“Or seriously drunk. And maybe naked in the hot tub.”  
Zoe grins gleefully before slamming the shot back.

The minute I gulp mine down, my eyes go to the stairs.

Mercer is watching me like a hawk, and even if he hasn't given me the time of day recently, my traitorous heart buckles under his gaze. Those aquamarine eyes assess me, sliding down my body, and I can't help the way my teeth dig into my lower lip.

This trip is going to make or break us, and every cell in my body vibrates with the knowledge that he'll be sleeping in the room right next to mine.

Who the hell said it was worth it to play nice with your ex?



**G**etting on a snowboard less than a year after fucking my entire knee up and risking my future is probably not the best idea.

But goddammit, I need a release, and it needs to be something that doesn't involve Emily Palmer in any way.

Frustrated is an understatement, and after being stuck in a car with her for the morning and then the house for a little of the afternoon, I need cold air and fresh powder to calm me down.

My snowboard glides down the trail I chose, flecks of snow flying up at my helmet as I swivel my hips to stay upright. It's been a while since I've been on a mountain, but it's like riding a bike. The smooth journey of my descent is a balm to my nerves, which were pretty close to feeling shot when I was holed up in that house.

The entire group of twenty or so people ventured out to the mountain, and it's about time to pack it up. Charlie came with me for two runs on the snowboard and then went over to the tubing hill to join most of the group. They were pretty rowdy coming out here, to begin with, so I can only imagine what's going on over there if they've been dipping into the spiked hot apple cider that the lodge serves.

Coming on the snow tubing trip wasn't really something I was up for after everything that's happened with Emily, but it's not like I could tell Charlie that. The plan is to keep my distance, drink enough to put me into a deep sleep, and get

through the next two days. Oh, and hope my coaches and trainers don't find out about the snowboarding because they'd definitely kill me for this.

Damn, I hate that Emily was right about this decision. It burns my veins even more than knowing I can't start shit with her. I can't yell and scream, I can't kiss her, I can't even pick a fight for fear of something happening.

When I watched her fall apart in the break room, it was like my world was crumbling. I panicked, going into fight mode for her and only her. I'd have done anything to stop the fear and hysteria in her eyes.

The last thing I wanted to do when she woke late in the night was pile on to her anxiety further. Listening to her talk about her ex made me murderous, but the broken tone of her voice was what sent me over the edge.

I'm terrified, sad, disappointed, yearning ... and telling her about any and all of those things will only make me feel like a huge tool. Emily has clearly been through it this past year, and I had no idea. I was so focused on my injury, on loathing her for how she broke us, that I haven't really looked at her to notice the cracks.

And now I'm angry at both of us. Me for not trying harder all these years when I am clearly not over her. And Emily, because she's so buried in the aftermath of her breakup, it wouldn't be fair for me to ask her to start another relationship yet. Yeah, I know that's not her fault. I shouldn't blame her for it. But I'm pissed off, and that anger has nowhere to go, so I've been an asshole the last couple of days, taking it out on her.

Ignoring her feels like the easiest way to go, but I realize how immature that is. I'm not proud of it.

My board reaches the bottom of the slope, and I get on the lift to ride back up, my lungs burning from the rush of energy and adrenaline. I'm an endurance athlete; running up and down a field for ninety minutes is my game. Working out my issues on the slopes today feels like coming home in a sense,

and my head and heart are clearer as I get on the lift to take me back to the lodge.

Our party of friends is at the bar when I arrive, and it figures my eyes dart directly to Emily.

She's in a camel-colored sweater that looks so soft I want to peel it off of her. All of that chocolate hair is spun into two braids that make her look like some kind of sexy schoolgirl, and she's sipping on a steaming hot drink while her nose remains pink from the cold.

Fuck, she's so beautiful that it makes it even harder to stay away. I've always had this problem when it comes to her, and I have to fist my hands until my nails bite into my skin to keep myself from walking over to her.

"Dude, how you feeling?" Zach, the owner of the house we stay at, claps me on the back.

"Pretty good, was nice to get back out there." I join him and Charlie at the bar.

"You missed Gen and Zoe flipping over on their tube, it was hilarious. They ate it." Charlie laughs, and I see Zoe flip him her middle finger.

"Want a drink? We were finishing up and going to go back to the house to get the party started, but ..."

I can tell the group is looking to me to make sure I don't want to stay for a drink. I hate this social pressure, but I've grown accustomed to it. Because I'm good on the soccer field, people look to me to be an entertainer. It feels like this expectation to be the ringleader when, most of the time, I want to sink into the background and blend in. Some of my teammates who have already gone pro have told me it only gets worse, this pressure of celebrity when all you want to do is be an athlete.

"Whatever you guys want to do, I'm following your lead." I try to put on a genuine smile, but it doesn't feel right.

Honestly, now that I'm off my snowboard, not much feels right. Part of me wishes I didn't come, but I'm here, so I might as well act the part.

The minute we arrive back to the cabin, everyone starts grabbing mini bottles off the Christmas tree Emily's college roommate decorated.

"Everyone grab one, we're having a toast to our first night!" Zoe demands.

Reluctantly, I grab a bottle of vodka off the middle of the tree and thank my lucky stars it isn't rum. Twisting the cap off, I gulp it down when Zach says cheers, and the rest of the group hollers with excitement after we're done.

Across the circle, Emily gives me a tentative smile. I see the hope there, in her hazel eyes, and all it does is scare me. Once upon a time, she ended us for much less than the future we're facing now. With her mental health, it's probably the worst timing to start something. I don't know if I'd survive her dumping me again.

That thought sits like lead in my stomach, and when everyone moves to the kitchen for snacks and more mixed drinks, I sneak off upstairs. The room I'm sleeping in just so happens to be the same one Emily and I shared for two years straight.

Nothing about it has changed, and the memory of us in here haunts me.

Downstairs, someone is singing Christmas karaoke into a microphone, and I hear another person shout about trying to make red and green Jell-O shots. Considering those take hours to set, and everyone is pretty hammered already, I chuckle at how bad of an idea it is.

We're so close to Christmas, and I feel more down than I have in months. I guess this is why experts say the holidays are the most depressing time of the year.

A knock on the door has me sitting up, and then she's entering the room, memories like ghosts accompanying her.

"Hey." Her voice is small, and I hate that we're here.

I hate that I don't know how to handle this, and I hate that I fear she'll hurt me so much more than she has. I hate that it's

making me this asshole who's treating her like crap, but I can't seem to stop.

"Hey." I don't sit up from where I'm lying on the bed, instead choosing to stare up at the ceiling than at her.

"Are you okay? Your knee doesn't hurt from today, does it?" Always so concerned about me in the ways I don't want her to be.

"I feel fine." I'm being a jerk.

"The nurse in me wants to make sure you're healthy as an ox." Her tone takes on that of a lame joke, as if she's trying to keep this conversation going but is awkward and self-conscious because I'm contributing nothing.

The room goes silent, and I think maybe she left, until she shuffles closer and sits on the end of the bed.

"Mercer, please look at me."

That subtle beg has me blinking down, my eyes landing on the most beautiful girl I've ever seen.

Em's smile is small, and the red and black buffalo plaid pajamas she wears look adorable. Well, adorable and sexy as hell considering the Henley top forms to every curve of her breasts and shows off cleavage that has my cock stirring.

"Did I freak you out the other day?" The way she says it, it's like she did something wrong.

Blanching internally, I shake my head. "No. I'm glad you told me everything you went through. I'm just sorry it happened."

"Except that you haven't spoken to me in two days and are acting like I'm some kind of plague to avoid on this trip." She folds her arms over her chest, accentuating her perfect tits further.

"All right, maybe it just made me ... reconsider. You've been through a lot, Em. You need time and space to be with yourself, and I don't want to risk putting you back in a head space that isn't healthy for you. I'll always be here for you as a friend, and—"



I don't get the rest of my "let her off easy" speech out before her warm lips press to mine.

Her kiss is sweet, cautious, and tastes a little of the alcohol she was drinking. I can't help but sink into it a bit, my fingers tunneling into her hair and twisting around the delicious softness.

The heat of her tongue as it pushes into my mouth, and any excuse or reason I thought up to leave her alone flies out of my head. Em angles her head to give me better access, and I take it. Our lips bite at one another, tongues sliding like seasoned lovers, hands roaming all over our upper half. My dick is stiff and jonesing to be touched, and my fingertips spark at the idea of pushing their way into her wet, warm folds.

But then the look in her eyes the other night during her anxiety attack floods my brain, and I jerk back.

"We shouldn't do this." To my own ears, I sound like I'm lying.

"Probably not." Emily's eyes cast downward, and I know she's feeling rejected.

"With both of us going away, I just don't want either of us to get hurt. Winter break is ending soon, and the last time we were going to college, you—"

Emily cuts me off because I know she doesn't want me to remind her of the mistake she made. "I told myself I wouldn't make this suggestion to you. I've hurt you enough in the past, and it might be a disrespectful thing to propose. But I miss you. I've known it for a while, even before I came home and got to be around you for an extended period of time. Being with you, kissing you, it's felt so good. So can't we just do what feels good for now? I want you, you want me. The future is looming so close and all I'm sure of right now is that I want to be with you, in whatever way I can be. Can't we just forget it all, for as long as we can?"

Having her for a short amount of time will kill me. How can I hold her in my arms, be intimate with her, listen to her talk and laugh, and not want to hold on to her forever? She's

right that it's disrespectful to ask after what she put my heart through last time. But I'm the one who's saying we can't be anything more to each other. I'm the one ending us before we begin this time.

"We've hurt each other too much. Why do so even more?" I won't point out that she's being a hypocrite after telling me the breakup was the biggest regret of her life. Why would she want to do it all over again?

"Because I can't seem to stay away from you," she whispers, pressing her fingers to the swollen lips I was just kissing.

The surge of need inside me won't be quelled. Even though the logical side of me knows this is a horrible idea, I won't turn her away. Not again. I'm weak for her, and here we are, sitting on a bed in a room filled with memories of our past. There is no way I'm letting her go, even if I know it'll break my heart again eventually.

"I can't either." My hand reaches out to caress her cheek, and Em's eyes flutter shut. "One thing, though ... Charlie can't find out." I lay down that rule and watch Emily's eyes open on a sad note.

"He'll know if something is going on."

We've never been good at hiding how we feel about each other. It's why I straight-up told him the first time I was going to ask his sister on a date. "But if this is ..." I can't bring myself to say temporary. "I just don't want my friendship with him to go through what it did last time. He'll be pissed if he knows we're having a fling, considering the way he was put in the middle last time."

Saying the word fling nearly kills me, but I can't lie to myself completely.

"Okay." Em nods.

Our eyes connect, and it's like I'm falling, unable to even put my arms out before I smash into the ground. Then we're wrestling each other to the bed, the green light given to push the envelope on us even if we break into a million pieces after.

She's under me, spreading her legs, and my eyes nearly roll back the first time I grind into her, even with all our clothes on.

"Oh God ..." Em's breathy gasp has me going impossibly harder.

"I fucking missed you." I lick a line from her jaw to her neck, tasting the deliciousness of her skin.

"*Mercer.*" She locks all her limbs around me, and just hearing my name on her lips sends me over the edge right now.

Those nimble fingers push my shirt halfway up my torso as she traces the lines of my muscles, and I shudder with the need to feel her naked skin all over me.

"Undress. Now." My tone turns lethal, and we both shuck off layers of clothes as quickly as possible.

While it's been years, and I want to take my time with her, I'm too amped up to do so. We've gone from zero to a hundred in a second, both of us panting as we settle back on the bed with nothing but underwear between us.

"You're so fucking sexy." She digests me reverently, biting her lip as I hover over her.

"Right back at ya, gorgeous." I smile, making sure my dimple pops the way I know she likes. "Now let me taste you. It's been years since I've eaten and I'm fucking starving."

"Holy crap, Mercer." Her eyes dilate. "Light my panties on fire, why don't you?"

"Nah, I'd rather rip them off." I do just that, pulling them down her legs whip fast.

Smelling her arousal glistening on her pussy lips has me canting my hips into the bed. Flattening my tongue against her center, I waste no time licking her from the bottom of her slit to the pulsing bundle of nerves. Em's hips buck up into my face, but I keep her pinned in place, her slim waist in my hands. The control turns me on even more as I fuck her with my tongue; the noises she's making driving me insane.

“So good, so good, so good,” she chants, not caring who hears her.

Even though I just made her promise me Charlie wouldn't find out, I barely care who hears her screaming my name so long as she does so. This power she has over me, this head trip being with her sends me on, is all-consuming.

“Watching you squirm is one of my favorite sights,” I confess, pumping two fingers into her as I suck her clit into my mouth.

She tastes like musk and sweet ecstasy. “Right *there*.”

“You want to come on my fingers or my cock, beautiful?” Talking dirty to her, watching her cheeks pink up as I hover over her with my fingers lodged inside, has got to be one of my top ten favorite activities.

How have I survived this long without being with her like this?

“Mercer. Need you. Now.” That husky demand has me moving with the grace of a panther stalking its prey.

Leaning over to grab a condom from my bag, thanking my horny brain for throwing them in at the last minute, I roll it on.

Looking down at Em, legs spread out for me with all those waves covering my pillows, I gulp back the emotion clogging my throat.

“Em ...” I shake my head, catching myself before I admit something she doesn't want to hear.

Her nails dig into my pecs as I line up, teasing her with the head of my cock that already feels like it'll explode the moment I sink inside her.

“Mmm ... God ...” Those hazel eyes blink as I push in, her tight heat gripping me like a damn vise.

“Not God, Em. Me. Only me.” My jaw tics as sweat beads my brow.

“Feels like heaven either way,” she murmurs, her tongue tracing the shell of my ear as I pin her with my body.

In and out, I stroke, building us both up until I can barely see straight. Em is moaning in my ear, and I grip any part of her body I can reach. Roll her nipples in my fingers. Squeeze her waist in my palm. Cup her face while our tongues tangle as deep as I'm buried in her.

The flutters of her orgasm start to fist around me, and I know she's close when she begins to shake.

"You going to come for me, beautiful?" I grunt, barely holding on myself.

"Mercer, come with me. I want it together." Her eyes bore holes into mine.

She doesn't have to ask twice. Unleashing all my pent-up fury, pleasure, and insatiable lust, I jackhammer into her pussy as we both cry unintelligible noises. On one stroke, I bottom out, lodged so deep inside her that it feels as if we might be one, and then the euphoria starts.

The base of my spine tingles, pleasure rockets through my balls and cock, and then Emily is crying out. Our eyes lock, orgasms wringing us dry as we experience it all together. Watching her come undone as I do at the same time is almost more than I can handle. Waterfalls of ecstasy give way to tiny trickles, the aftershocks spiking even as I pull out of her.

Bending to her lips as I hover on top of her, I kiss Em so deeply, my breath runs out.

"Best Christmas present ever." I sigh, rolling off and taking her with me until we're snuggled up together.

Em chuckles. "You unwrap well. I almost forgot how well."

"How many holiday sex puns can we come up with?"

"Enough until your tree is tall enough to light my star again."

If I weren't panting from the exertion of my climax, I'd be wheezing with laughter. "That one was too forced."

"All right, hm. You can kiss my *clitstletoe*? We can knock boots like the elves? Let me ride your sleigh?" Em's eyes are

closed as she cracks the jokes.

“You’re too much.” I forgot how easy being with her was before all our shit got in the way.

Next to me, she begins to sit up, and I know that slice of reality is crawling back into her brain.

“Stay.” I pull her back down to me.

“People will wonder where we are,” she hedges.

“Eh, they’ll think we both passed out or something. Stay in here tonight.” Even with the complications, I can’t let her go now that I have her back.

She nods, seeming to realize the risk is worth it.

An even better present than being buried inside her? Falling asleep with the only girl I’ve ever loved held tight against me.



MERCER

**S**ometime during the night, we both wake simultaneously, reaching for each other until we're fused together.

Em rises on her knees, straddling me, and my hands plant on her hips as I lower her down onto my cock.

"Fuck, that's the best feeling in the world." I growl as her tits smash into my chest.

"You're insatiable." She chuckles, her voice still hoarse with sleep.

"Says the woman stroking up and down on me right now like she'll never get enough of my dick." I give her ass a gentle tap, and the action has her fucking me a little faster.

Words cease to exist then, no sounds coming from us except for the wet suck of her body on mine. In the moonlight, I worship her body, running my hands over her breasts, ass, stomach, and face as she brings us to the brink of insanity.

Buried inside her, I feel the most like me than I have in years. Emily might think this is fleeting, that this good feeling will only last for a moment, and then we'll separate with no inkling of our hearts being cut out of our chests.

But it won't be like that for me. I'm hanging on for dear life this time, and I'll show her that this is meant to last. She said it herself, that breaking up was a huge mistake. I know she feels this, this intense connection between us that will never go away. Not with time or distance.



Em lets out a whimper, throwing her head back as she grinds down onto me.

My thumb circles her clit, once, twice, and then she's gasping as she spasms on my dick. I follow mere seconds after, her orgasm milking my release as I shoot up into her. My vision is stolen, and all rational thought left behind as my existence is nothing but feeling and Emily.

Even though we've been playing around all night in bed, this release feels more intense. When I come back to myself, she's hunched over me, her eyes blinking sleepily at mine. My hand strokes up and down her smooth back, her body still connected to mine as she sprawls all over me.

The games we've been playing and the rules we set out, they're all for naught. With every touch and every look, we both know this is way more than a winter break fling.

After a quick trip to the bathroom to dispose of the condom, I crawl back into bed and scoop her into my arms. She's an addiction I haven't fed in too long, and now that I've felt her skin under my fingers, I can't get enough.

"Will you come tubing today instead? I worry about your knee," she admits quietly, snuggling into my chest.

"That's sweet, Em." I kiss her temple.

"Don't tease me."

"I'm not. I miss you worrying about me." She has always been one of the only people to do so.

"I know how much you want this next portion of your life. I don't want to see you do anything to risk that." Her nails rake up and down my chest gently, and even with how sore my dick is, it twitches with interest.

"It's already been risked. It's already been messed with. I don't know ... it feels like not much else could get in my way if that makes you feel better?"

I can practically feel Emily's frown. "It doesn't. And I know it's just a lie you tell yourself. You really forget that I know you too well, Mercer."

Unnerving. That's how it feels to have her call me out for such a bold-faced fib. Because Em and I don't even need to go through the motions of having a discussion about my injury, about the draft, and everything that followed, for her to know my innermost thoughts. She can just look at me and know where my head is at.

Right now, though, I'm not thinking about that part of my future. What I want to tell her is how nothing in this next chapter will matter if she isn't next to me. That without her, I'll never be happy. But I'll devise my own plan to make her see that. Right now is not the time to get into all of that.

"Yeah, I'll come tubing. But only if you let me get you in the hot tub later." The idea of Em all wet and nearly naked with a tiny scrap of bathing suit has me drooling, even with her in my arms.

"You'll have to control yourself around other people." Her voice holds a hint of something I can't quite read.

"Or maybe you'll have to." Em yawns, and I squeeze her impossibly closer. "Let's fall back asleep for a while. I want to dream about you while you're in my bed."

Em makes a happy, exhausted noise, and I run my fingers in her silky locks, the action lulling me back into a deep sleep.

It's the best night of sleep I've gotten in forever, and only because, finally, after years of seeing her only in my dreaming hours, I have Emily by my side.



Something smells like it's burning as I walk into the faded yellow kitchen of my grandfather's house.

"Grandpa, what are you cooking?" I plug my nose as I search for an oven mitt or something to swat away the fumes.

"Ah, shit!" My grandfather comes around the corner from the living room.

In his red checkered Christmas flannel pants and a Miami pro soccer team sweatshirt, I sent him last year, he quickly heads for the oven and pulls out a pan containing something that's now black.

I've only been home for two days from the tubing trip, and it hits me that I haven't spent enough time with Grandpa while I've been home. His hands are shakier than they were when I was home in the summer, and I've witnessed him forgetting more. Guilt hits my gut because while I was busy spending every second of the trip with Emily, mostly in bed, Grandpa was here fending for himself.

Em is expecting me to meet her tonight for a drive up to Starlight Hill, and I've been thinking of nothing else. Except now, I'm not quite sure I feel comfortable leaving Grandpa to go.

"I was trying to make hazelnut pie, but I guess I forgot to put the timer on." His thin gray hair blows around as he opens the window, letting in an icy blast.

Together, we wave some oven mitts at the smoke, and it dissipates slightly.

“Are you feeling okay?” Eyeing him warily, I wonder if he forgot or if his mind is going.

Worrying about Grandpa has become second nature. He’s cared for me my entire life, and now that he’s getting older, it’s only natural that I want to take over caring for him. I know my life will take me away from my hometown, and he won’t be able to come with me. It scares me to think about him here alone as he grows frailer or needs someone to remind him to take his meds.

“I’m fine, Mercer.” A pointed, bushy gray eyebrow tells me not to push this line of questioning.

“I just want to make sure you’re okay, that you don’t need me to come home more? Hey, I could set up for someone to come by a couple days a week.”

Grandpa sits down at the kitchen table and starts to unfold the newspaper he had sitting there. “And I’d say hell no to that. Does that pie look salvageable? Cut us some slices.”

Walking over to the oven, still hazy with smoke, I take the pie to the cutting board. It doesn’t look half bad, and even if my grandpa is rough around the edges, he’s always cooked like a high-maintenance chef. I plate the slices and pour us two glasses of milk, just like he used to do for me when I was a little kid.

We eat silently at first, Grandpa humming as he reads certain articles. The window is still open, filling the kitchen with cold air. My grandpa’s old ranch isn’t necessarily run down, but it’s old and worn in, like the man himself. The floors are creaky, the carpets ancient. My bedroom always has a musty smell in the summer, and the tiles in each bathroom have been grouted one time too many.

It’s his happy place, I know that, but it doesn’t mean I don’t want to take care of him when I eventually sign my pro deal. He’ll fight me tooth and nail, I know that much.

“What do you want me to make for Christmas? Bangers and mash?” Grandpa is half Irish and, therefore, thinks we need to have traditional feasts on holidays, even though he’s never traveled there.

Maybe that’s where I should take him when I sign my deal.

“Sure. I mean, you don’t have to cook if it’s too much.” Trying to broach this again is risky, but I won’t be one of those kids who avoids having this talk just to make us comfortable.

“Stop doing that,” he warns.

I hold up my hands. “I’m just saying I don’t need to go back to school right away. Maybe I could delay a semester or fly home more often throughout the weeks when I don’t have games. If it’s too much, we can look for a place that will assist you. I could try to join a minor league team closer to this area —”

“I didn’t raise you to be an idiot.” He frowns. “So stop being one now.”

“Grandpa, don’t be like that, I—”

He cuts me off. “If and when the time comes that I need you to put me in a home, I’ll tell you. Got it? I’m not a big enough prideful fool to hobble around this house without help if I need it. But don’t you think, not in a million years, that I’d want you to give up everything you’ve worked for, something you’re so talented at, to come home and wipe my ass.”

Leave it to Grandpa to turn an emotional moment into some crass joke.

“You promise?” Emotion clogs my throat. “I can’t imagine losing you now.”

That’s what this comes down to.

Grandpa clears his throat like he’s imagining it, too. “Don’t worry, kid. I’m a mean old bastard, and nothing is taking me anytime soon. And even if ... hell, you’re a strong man, Mercer. I raised you to be, and you’ve exceeded all my expectations. You’re going to live a life that a lot of people didn’t think was possible for you, and I’m damn proud.”

When he reaches a hand across the table, I grab it and squeeze.

“Now, tell me what’s going on in your head. Because I’ve never heard you decide to voluntarily give up the future you’ve always dreamed of, so this can’t just be about my elderly ass.” He skewers me with a look that says he sees right through me.

I fork off another piece of pie, and besides the slightly burnt taste, it’s fantastic.

“I don’t know. I’m anxious about this season. Looking forward to being done with college. Sad to leave at the same time. Nervous as hell that I won’t get signed, or that my knee will go to shit again. But if I am, I’m nervous I won’t perform. Or that my life will blow up due to the publicity. Then there is the fact that I won’t get back to Queenwood a lot, and I won’t see the people who matter to me.”

“One of those people happen to be Emily Palmer?” Grandpa raises an eyebrow.

“Are you psychic or something?” I accuse, my fork clattering to my plate.

He shrugs. “I just seen a lot of things in this life. Namely, you being in love with that girl since you knew what the word meant. I can practically smell it on you since you came home.”

“Ew, Grandpa.” That sounds gross.

“All I’m saying is that you’ve been stuck on that girl for a long, long time and playing professional soccer doesn’t have to change that. You just gotta be brave enough to make it work. As for the rest of it, I’ll tell you to stop being an idiot again. You’re going to kick ass this season, and every professional scout is going to see it. Mercer, you know who you are and where you come from. You won’t forget it.”

A tiny sliver of hope and confidence fills my heart. If Grandpa sees that in me, then I can believe in it. He’s never steered me wrong.

“Maybe we’ll add some peppermint schnapps to our shopping list for Christmas. We need to unwind, both of us. A

viewing of a nineteen forties Christmas movie and some liquor, that's what we need." Grandpa snaps his fingers.

"Sounds like the perfect holiday to me." I laugh.

Now that we are at this stage in our lives, holidays like this seem to grow more precious. Thinking that there will come a day when he won't be here to serenade me with his rendition of "Jingle Bells" makes me choke on the air in my lungs.

No matter what other complicated shit I have going, I need to remember that I am here to spend time with him.

Even if it feels like a doomsday clock is ticking down on my time with Emily, everything else can wait.





## MERCER

**S**tanding in the middle of the field, grass under my cleats, the cheer of thousands of fans ... it's the place on this earth that I feel most in tune with myself.

So, being in this soccer bubble in Queenwood, the same one I've trained at for high school in the winters, while Emily dribbles a ball next to where I'm stretching? Yeah, this is pretty much the center of my fucking universe.

When I suggested getting some drills and shots in at the white blow-up building with three turf fields outside our hometown, I didn't think she'd want to accompany me. It reminds me of the winters in high school when she'd come to watch me practice with the private trainer here. I'd get so fucking distracted by the pencils stuck in her hair as she studied on the bleachers.

So distracted that I'd race to take them out as we made out in the parking lot after my sessions.

Being back in our hometown and involved with Em is like being transported to our past. Neither of us says shit about the heartbreak that's coming for us. We don't talk about the future. We just focus on what feels good, like she proposed, and rewrite old memories as our older selves.

The other night, we relived the memory of us losing our virginity at Starlight Hill. Except we're older, with much more experience, and Em made me see goddamn stars as she rode me in the back of my truck. As far as winter flings go, this is probably everything anyone could ask for. It's been a week

since we first made the agreement on the tubing trip, and I can't even lie; this is the happiest I've been in years.

So, the fact we're once again sleeping together, having pillow talk, *and* she wants to kick around with me? Yeah, I hit the fucking lottery.

"Am I more of a midfielder or a striker? It's been so long since I played." Emily attempts to dribble the ball but only gets three kicks in before it goes out of reach, and she's diving for it.

Effortlessly, my feet carry into action, dribbling the ball back and forth between my knees, feet, and head as I talk like I'm not moving at all. This activity is second nature for me, and she pouts at how easy it comes.

"You're definitely a midfielder or a back, leave the striking to me." I wink at her, cockier in my natural element.

Heading the ball into the net on the other side of the field, I break into a sprint and swerve around her at the last second.

"All right, hotshot. We get it, you're going pro. You're going to run circles around me, no need to show off."

"But showing off for you is one of my favorite pastimes." I throw her a smirk as I jog backward down the field in search of the ball I kicked.

"I will admit, it does get me a little hot and bothered being back here with sexy college Mercer. He's got muscles that teenage Mercer never did." Em flips over, gathers her hair up in her hands, and comes back up to secure it with a hair tie.

The action has my entire body standing at attention. From the skintight black athletic leggings to the cropped sweatshirt to the way her body moves as she jogs and kicks around with me.

Yeah, this whole night is very much fucking doing it for me.

"Glad that time in the gym has paid off in some fashion," I tease.

“So, what’re we playing for? Who has to buy dinner?” she muses, stretching her arms over her head as she walks to where I stand at the goal.

“How about who goes down on who first?” I murmur just loud enough for her to hear.

Em’s cheeks burst with a pink blush, and it’s almost enough to make me want to drag her to the locker room.

I never get to hear her response because an obnoxious voice yells, “Yo! First person to five goals makes the losers buy ice cream from Big Chad’s!”

The one chink in the armor to this solid hangout with Emily? The fact that her brother asked to tag along. Charlie heard me ask her if she wanted to come to the bubble and immediately counted himself in. Of course, he has no idea this is a semi-date because that would mean we weren’t lying to her brother and my best friend, respectively.

I curse myself every second for laying down that rule. Except somewhere in the back of my mind, I know it’ll pay off when my relationship with my best friend isn’t ruined after his sister breaks my heart for the second time.

Emily hops away from me, skipping across the white lines of the field as she sends her brother a thumbs-up. “Then you better be prepared to buy me a huge freaking sundae.”

“You wish. You’ve always been terrible at soccer.” Charlie snickers as he sets his stuff down and ties on some turf shoes. “Mercy, you kick her ass yet?”

“We’ve just been warming up. I only came here to kick your ass, anyway.” I try to hide the disappointment at him joining us with humor.

Don’t get me wrong, I love my best friend. Coming back to Queenwood for the winter was partially so we could spend more time together before real life takes over. But now that Emily and I are back on, albeit secretly, the only thing I want to do until January tenth rolls around is be naked and alone with her.

Telling Charlie that will probably go over about as well as a heart attack.

“Just passed Nanette Wilds and Jeremy Rigco kissing outside the diner, how fucking weird is that? What’s with random people we knew in high school, who never talked to each other, hooking up during college breaks?”

I nearly choke on the water from the bottle I just picked up to drink. Charlie is so close to hitting a mark he doesn’t want to know about, I almost think he’s psychic.

Em, however, seems to keep her cool effortlessly. “People get lonely. We all grew up, some of us just get hotter with time. Unfortunately, you don’t know what that’s like, brother. But when they see these people who they didn’t notice in high school, and they’re home with nothing better to do, I mean, why not?”

Is that what she thinks about me? From the talks we’ve had, I don’t think so. But I’m not going to say it wouldn’t burn if she does.

“Um, because there are a thousand chicks at school who I could hook up with who don’t know my mom or that time I peed my pants in kindergarten?” Charlie winces.

“Forget the time you peed your pants, remember when you took a header into the pole of the tennis net during gym class? Your nose was fucked.” The memory has me laughing as I tease my best friend.

Charlie rubs his nose. “That shit hurt for months after.”

“Or the time he woke up late and accidentally came to school with those pants that had a ripped seam in the butt,” Em piles on.

“You two just going to shit talk me or are we going to play?” he grumbles.

“You were the one being judgmental,” Emily singsongs.

We form a little triangle and begin passing the ball back and forth, then begin to run a little as we pass up and down the field. Emily keeps up with us and kicks Charlie’s ass with the

physical shape he's in. The three of us start up a little mini-game of pickup, goofing off, and scoring goals ridiculously, before Charlie begs off for a break and a drink of water.

I stretch in the middle of the field as he does so, relishing the feeling of moving my body by playing the sport I love. I can't fucking wait for the season to start.

"Come on, are we done or playing more?" I'm whining, but now that I've been moving, I don't want to stop.

"Dad thinks he found the tree for the competition." Charlie's head is stuck in his phone, and I kick a ball at it.

He narrowly avoids it when he looks up, and it grazes his shoulder. "Dude! You coulda killed me with that foot on you."

I roll my eyes. "Then pay attention. Are we here to play, or are we here to talk about some dumb 'tree-off'?"

"It's not dumb." An expression of hurt passes over Em's face.

I start toward her and then stutter, realizing it'll violate the term I set forth about not telling Charlie about us. But it takes everything in me not to take her in my arms to apologize.

"That's our family farm; my parents are very proud of it. It might be dumb to you, but it means more foot traffic for Mom and Dad next year, and that's everything to them," she scolds me.

"You're right, I'm sorry I said that." I reach out and squeeze her shoulder.

Taking my hand away is torture when all I want to do is pull her into me and kiss the daylights out of her to make up for my stupidity. Pigeonholing us into keeping this quiet was a necessary stipulation, even if it feels like a mistake constantly. Because of it, I can't touch her as much as I want, and time is already running out.

"Buy me a slushy?" She bats her eyelashes at me.

"Ah, a callback to old times?" Reaching out, I link my pinky with hers.

Sure, it's risky even touching her when I set the rule, but I am dangerously close to just saying fuck it. Plus, buying her a slushy at this place is a pastime that makes every piece of nostalgia rush up at me.

While Charlie is still engulfed in his cell, she and I walk around the halls until we get to the snack stand. I go to grab a straw for her, and Em follows me. We used to hang out here all the time in high school. She'd sit in the bleachers studying or reading, and every so often, I'd scale the small set of metal benches and plop a sloppy kiss on her lips, and she'd giggle hilariously. Those memories sit like warm chocolate chip cookies in my chest, gooey and so sweet. Buying her a slushy to end the night is our ritual.

Emily and I had been in love. It wasn't some teenage thing or a crush we thought was more. I really loved her, and she really loved me.

"Mistletoe." I point up above us after putting in an order for two strawberry-banana smoothies.

"My brother is going to come looking for us at any moment." Those hazel eyes go shifty.

I hook a finger under the collar of her sweatshirt and drag her closer. "Then you better kiss me before he does."

Our lips meet in haste, a stolen moment of heat and secret that has my cock jumping with anticipation. The smell of the rec center, the same metal bleachers around us, and the whir of the smoothie machine as our mouths collide transports me back to a time when I thought I'd never lose her.

I try to blur it out, to block the emotions threatening to attach themselves to our fling just as Em attaches her mouth to mine. This is just for now, a good time had for all, a short period of satisfaction that shouldn't lead to me getting my heart broken.

But with each stolen moment, I know I'm only going to crash harder. We'd been in love back then, and even with all this time apart, I never really stopped.





“That’ll be twenty-five dollars, please. These angel ornaments are made by a local artist, aren’t they just beautiful?”

The customer hands me her credit card. “They are, I just had to have one when I spotted them on the display.”

Running it through our tablet payment setup, I wrap the ornament and bag it before handing it over the counter. “I hope you have a merry Christmas, thank you for shopping with us.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way, dear. My husband and I have been coming to this farm from nearly an hour away since our kids were little and still lived at home. It’s just so nice to see it still remain in the family.”

My heart warms at her words. While my brother and I have other plans for our futures, and our parents have never once discouraged us from them or put pressure on us to come home and run the Christmas tree farm, real-life testimonials like this one make me want to settle close to home. The plan is to work at the hospital I am vying for by my university, but I always envision myself moving back to Queenwood at some point.

Someday, my parents won’t be able to run the farm themselves. It will fall to Charlie and me, or we’d have to sell it. But whenever I think of the holidays without this place, without working in the barn or helping families find the perfect pine, something just feels off.

“That’s so nice to hear, truly. It means so much that we can be a part of your tradition.” I beam at her and nearly start to well up with tears.

When everything feels like it is on this precipice of change, it’s nice to know that some constants will never shift in my life. This farm is one of them, if I have any say.

A bunch of customers mill around the barn, checking price tags or trying to pick out the special ornament they’ll place on their tree this year. Helping in the shop is one of my favorite things to do, it gives me such joy watching people purchase something I know will be passed down for generations to come.

The morning is winding down, and we’ll all break for lunch soon, with some of the seasonal staff grabbing lunch together and others going home. I’m not sure how we achieved it, but the break room at the back of the barn has become Mercer and my little oasis during that hour. No one seems to stick around to eat back there, thus giving us alone time, and we’ve used it to our advantage.

Aside from Mercer constantly trying to feel me up and me batting him away, even if it’s half-hearted, we spend our lunch hour talking and sitting way too close together. It feels like old times when he was my best friend and we could talk about anything and everything.

How quickly we’ve fallen back into place once we laid our grudge down. It’s almost scary how quick. Which only means the inevitable breaking off of things will send me into a tailspin, but it feels so good right now that I can’t stop.

“Close it down, Palmer. I’ve got a turkey and cranberry panini with your name on it.” Mercer holds up a bag as he passes the checkout counter.

“Oh my God, you went to the Burnt Bridge for me?” I sigh dreamily.

“You’d think I bought you a field of roses rather than a ten-dollar sandwich with the way you’re acting.”

I hit a bunch of keys on the register, lock the cashbox, and then pop open the swinging door to fall in step with him.

“I’d rather have the sandwich.”

“Which is why I drove twenty minutes to your favorite cafe to get it.” The way he smiles at me makes it feel like the full warmth of the sun is blazing on my face.

The deeper we get into this, the more I am sure I’ll have to dig myself out, broken heart and all, when he leaves. I may have been the one to propose we keep this simple, have a fling, but it doesn’t mean I don’t kick myself for it daily. Most of me is terrified to actually have the conversation, to admit that I want a second chance—a full, real, second chance at our relationship. I can’t tell Mercer that I want to do the long-distance no matter how much I miss him, because what if he rejects me?

Yes, he’s been downright pissed and held a grudge about our breakup. But with where he is at in life right now, he can’t possibly want his high school sweetheart tying him down. This arrangement feels more feasible, which is why I brokered it.

Except now, as my heart beats for him and only him, and all I want to do is spend every moment of the day talking to or looking at or fucking him, I regret asking him to be such a fleeting thing. On the nights we don’t spend together, which is so rare now that our time is limited, I stare at the ceiling and wonder what I’ll do when we separate once more.

From the moment I saw Mercer on that tree farm, everything fell back into place like we’d never been apart. Maybe that’s how it’s supposed to be when you find your one person: easy, effortless, like blinking or breathing. Everything with Mercer is just common sense.

My last breakup sent me into a spiral, but it wasn’t because of the man I lost. This time? These few weeks of winter break with Mercer feel so much more impactful than that entire relationship and subsequent ending. Losing him would wreck me.

But it's not like I can stop. I'm an addict, a moth to a flame, a person who keeps getting burnt and then asking for more fire. Stopping is not an option.

"These smell so damn good," Mercer mutters as he unwraps our sandwiches and sets them out on the rickety card table in the break room.

I grab us napkins and fill two mugs with hot chocolate because what is our ritual without the drink we love, even if it doesn't go with our meal.

As I sit across from him, I don't miss the way he's rubbing his knee.

"You sore?" I try for nonchalant in my tone of voice, but I'm worried.

He shrugs. "This much physical labor would make anyone sore. I'm fine, the knee is fine."

"But you would tell us if you thought it was too much work, right?" I know he won't.

"Of course." He grins, and we both know he's bluffing.

"Let me massage it, work out the ache." I motion for him to pull his pant leg up.

Mercer shakes his head. "Eat your sandwich, bossy."

I take one massive bite and then scoot my chair around the table toward him. "Come on, boot up here."

Indecision wars in those aqua eyes, but eventually, he hefts that muscled leg onto my waiting thigh. The weight of it isn't uncomfortable, but it is heavy.

"You don't have to do this."

"And yet I want to."

He's sore, I can tell, and there isn't anything more on this earth that I want than making him feel better. It's like my heart and soul snap right back into Mercer-mode the minute they see him.

Rolling up his pant leg isn't an easy task, but we work together to get it over his knee. Nothing looks out of sorts from the lens of my naked eye, which helps ease my worry a bit. I start slow, brushing my fingers gently over the skin before putting a little more pressure on his joints and muscles.

“Ugh, that feels so good. You've got magic hands.” His head drops back in agony and relief as I work at the strained muscles under his perfect, slightly tanned skin.

It's really unfair, even if I reap the rewards, how gorgeous he is. His skin has that bronzed feature only someone who lives in a warm-weather state almost year-round can have. That blond hair is tousled and windblown from the snow, and it curls as he runs his hands through it. Everything about Mercer is super-sized, from his lean legs to those arms that make me feel tiny to the monster appendage he has hiding in his pants.

“Funny, I usually say that to you.” Even if I make myself blush from the innuendo, I can't help flirting.

He tenses up a bit, and I know I've hit a spot that aches more than the other parts of his leg. Looking down, I see the scar from his surgery. It's still pink, not yet faded to a silvery white from years of healing.

“It still hurts, huh?”

“Most days, no.” Mercer shakes his head. “But when I overwork it, I can tell it isn't what it used to be. Not to say I'm not light-years ahead of the normal person in athletic ability or strength. I'm just reminded, at times, that I'm not as invincible as I once thought I was.”

“It must piss you off that teams wouldn't just draft you.” Not a smooth way to bring it up, but I've been meaning to.

Mercer doesn't mind people being blunt, though, so I don't hesitate. I mean, I'm fucking pissed about it. Have been since it happened. Those front office soccer goons should have seen the potential in him even if he couldn't play his senior year or make it to a training camp or combine. They should have had more faith in him, but then again, professional sports isn't a

business built on hope and faith. It's built on money, statistics, prospects, and a lot of other factors that make mere mortal bodies seem invincible.

“Fuck yeah, it did. I was fucking livid for a good week after that. For all the work I've put in, for how letter of the law I've been in the eyes of the pro teams and the national organization, it was almost like a betrayal. But it wasn't personal, so I can't take it like that. This is a business. The sooner I got that in my head, the easier it was to move on and grind like hell to get into the league. It's been my dream, my purpose, forever. Why the hell am I going to give that up just because a bunch of suits decided I wasn't worth the financial risk? I'll show them.”

His face is set in such determination that it inspires something in me. God, he's formidable. If that had happened to me, I'd likely crumple. Hell, my mental state had been in shambles for something far less in the grand scheme of things. Mercer was so resilient that it made me want to be that way, too.

My hands drift higher, until I'm almost at the apex of his thigh.

Blue eyes blaze at me from half-mast as I rub his knee. “You trying to turn this into a happy ending massage? 'Cause that can be arranged.”

“Let me take care of you.” I hit him with another thinly veiled sex implication.

“*Emily.*” His voice is a warning, and it sends tingles down my spine.

It's been less than twelve hours since he was inside me on the couch in my parent's basement, and yet I'm horny as a dog in heat.

My hands move gently across his skin, pushing and pressing while sighs of relief fall from Mercer's lips. Taking care of him like this is something I often envision when we're together; I won't lie and say being his WAG wasn't a huge fantasy of mine back in the day. Obviously, I have zero

aspirations of being the stereotypical trophy wife a lot of the public envisions, but I will fantasize about taking care of him after games, wearing his jersey, and being his shoulder to lean on during hard seasons or injuries. I want to be all of that for Mercer.

“How’s your anxiety been?” His hand stills mine where I dig my fingers into his flesh, and I realize he’s taking my silent ruminating as worry.

The warmth of his fingers brushing over mine is addicting. “Better.”

“You wouldn’t lie to me, would you?” he hedges, bringing his leg off my lap.

Mercer scoots his chair so that his legs straddle mine, my knees hitting the rim of his chair while he pulls me into his chest. If anyone walks in right now, there’ll be no way to play this off as a platonic chat.

“Honestly, I’ve been feeling good. My medication is working, I haven’t been in my head as much, and my worries have eased.”

For now. It’s easier being home with him, with no thoughts of my future plaguing me. That will change soon, but for now, I feel solid.

“Have you ever thought of going into a nursing field that helps with mental health?” Mercer looks earnest as he says this.

It’s a turn-on that he’s not shying away from my recent issues. I shouldn’t be surprised, though. When we were together, he was the teenage boy who didn’t mind when I talked about tampons, my period, or other female health things. He’s always been so open and even eager to talk about anything. Still, it’s refreshing that I feel absolutely no judgment or shame when he wants to have a conversation about this.

“I mean, I won’t say it doesn’t cross my mind. Of course, I’d like to learn more, especially hands-on, about something that affects me so deeply. But part of the reason I love nursing

is that the emergency work takes me out of my own head. It forces me to do nothing other than focus on my patient, focus on getting them as comfortable and healthy as they can be in that moment. I fear that working with someone who suffers from mental health complications will only remind me of my own, and then I won't love nursing as much as I do."

"I can understand that." His hands come up to band around my neck, and then he pulls me into his chest until my forehead rests there.

The position might not have our bodies fully pushed up on one another, but it feels so intimate and safe. He's rubbing a hand up and down my back, massaging the worry out of me like I just massaged some of the ache from his knee. We've always been good at this, comforting each other and knowing exactly what the other person needs. I took that for granted.

When I decided we had to break up before college, I got into my head that I was just in some puppy love stage. That I couldn't have possibly found my forever person at such a young age, that we only worked because we were teenagers in our suburban town. My thought had been that once the world got ahold of us, we'd turn into different people, and it was best to sever the tie before it broke horribly. Looking back, I probably had undiagnosed anxiety about future scenarios long before I recognized it.

Even though I shouldn't say it, I start to speak words into his shirt. "I'm sorry I didn't give us a chance. You know, back then, I thought it was for our own good, and after seeing who else was out there, we'd—"

"Emily?" My voice is shouted in the distance, echoing off the walls of the barn outside the door.

Any second, whoever is looking for me will come back here to check. It has Mercer pulling away from me, the legs of his chair scraping across the floor. My heart sinks, rejection sitting heavy in my gut.

We keep doing this to each other. The push and pull, the half explanations. We can never seem to get the timing right,



and just when I think there will be some kind of breakthrough, we settle for less so as not to rock the boat.

Which is what Mercer does now as he stands, gives me half a smile, and then turns to pull on his jacket. Work is calling, and so is whoever came out searching for me.

With more questions than answers, so many words left unsaid, and that little flame of hope burning in my chest, I follow Mercer's lead. Pulling on my winter gear, we walk out into the barn and separate without so much as a backward glance.

For the thousandth time since I proposed it, I curse myself for putting us in this hookup, situationship territory. Because my heart hurts so damn bad at Mercer's nonchalance, even though I'm the one who put us here.



“Charlie, you ready?”

I knock on my brother’s bedroom door with a gloved hand and huff. He’s running ten minutes late, and tonight is one of my favorite parts of Christmas in Queenwood.

Every year, most streets in town doll up their houses in extravagant light displays, and then the residents ride around in golf carts or the back of pickup trucks to view them. It’s an annual tradition, and since we’ve gotten older, we’ve started making the trip with wine in our water bottles.

Charlie promised to drive me around this year and be the designated driver, but he’s been in his room forever. I listen through the door and don’t hear a peep, so I push it open.

“Em?” my brother croaks from somewhere under his covers.

“Oh shit, are you okay?” I rush over to him.

He shakes his head. “I feel like crap. I think I got food poisoning or something, been on the toilet all day.”

“Ew, too much information. Jeez, ah, okay. Do you need me to get Mom or Dad? Do you need medication?” He looks pale and a little green.

“It’s been a few hours since anything came out either end.”

“Again, gross.” I shudder.

“Just saying, I think I might be past the worst of it. But there is no way I can go tonight, sorry, sis.”

“No, no, don’t worry about it. You don’t even look like you can stand at this point.” I feel his forehead, and even if it’s clammy, he doesn’t feel hot with a fever.

“The keys to the cart are on the kitchen table, take it. You should still go see the lights, they’re your favorite part of Christmas.”

Even if my brother acts like a doofus most of the time, he cares about me and what makes me happy. Of course, I am more worried about his illness and making sure he’s okay, but I am bummed about not seeing the lights with him. It’s much more fun to go together like we always have. Going alone feels strange and not very festive.

I’m sitting on the couch ten minutes later, debating what to do, when the doorbell rings.

Going to open it, I’m surprised to see the person standing on the other side. “Mercer?”

“The puke patient texted me that he was out of commission and you needed a chariot for the night. So I’m at your service.” He flourishes his hands like he’s my chauffeur.

“I’m not sure he would have called you had he known what’s been going on.” I lower my voice but allow Mercer to pull me into a hug.

“My gain, his loss, although he doesn’t know it.” Those full lips press into my temple and linger.

Per usual, whenever he’s around, my body lights up. Something about being in Mercer’s presence makes everything feel better and look sparklier.

“Should I go up and check on him before we go?” he asks.

I shake my head. “He conked out right after I took his temperature. I can’t believe he called you. That was really sweet.”

“Is it sweeter of your brother for calling me, or me for volunteering?” He loops an olive-green scarf around his neck

and pulls the black beanie down over his ears.

He should not look so damn sexy in winter gear, but my God, if he doesn't leave my mouth dry. Something about a hot guy in a beanie just does it for me.

"I'm sorry, are you trying to out-charm Charlie? Who is my brother and you're in no way in competition with?" I make a grossed-out face.

Mercer shrugs, lacing his hand in mine. "I have to take my wins where I can get them with you. Anyway, you ready to go?"

My eyes darted up the stairs. "You think it's okay to leave him? I just worry."

A large hand cups my cheek and turns my face so that I am just inches from Mercer's lips. "He wouldn't have called me if he needed a nurse. Stop stressing. This is your favorite night of the holiday season and you're not missing it. I won't let you."

Years ago, Mercer and I had ridden in the back of the golf cart and could barely keep our hands to ourselves on our first Christmas as a couple. Reliving that will be a highlight of this holiday season, even if our situation has a timestamp.

"Okay." For some reason, a shyness has enveloped my belly, leaving butterflies in its wake.

While we've been hooking up in private and maintaining a friendship-level working relationship on the tree farm, this is our first hangout alone since we've been back in Queenwood. It's the closest thing to a date we've had. Before my anxiety attack, we were supposed to go out and talk about us, talk about the clear feelings that still exist here. Then Mercer had all but ghosted me until I propositioned him on the ski trip, and we haven't talked about all that lingers between us since.

With him showing up to drive me around tonight among all the romantic, twinkling Christmas lights, this hangout feels more intimate than most. It might also give us some time so that I can confess everything I've been thinking. It will give me a chance to apologize for breaking us up all those years ago.

Mercer escorts me to the passenger side of the golf cart and leans over to check that I'm fully in the seat. "Have to make sure my girl is secure."

*His* girl. My heart flutters like it's the homecoming dance our sophomore year, and he's slow dancing with me all over again.

"You're really playing up this whole chauffeur thing, huh?"

"And the fact your brother is letting me drive the cart. He never lets me do this." Mercer gives me a quick peck on the cheek.

Tonight, he's being a little more brazen with his affection, but I guess it is dark, and no one else is around.

Except the minute we pull out of my parent's neighborhood and onto one of the main roads in town, other golf carts drive around us until we're in a sea of them heading for the lights display. As far as traditions go, this is one of Queenwood's biggest, and I've always adored it.

One of his big hands is on the steering wheel, while the other rests on my thigh. The wind whips past us as we drive down familiar streets marked with memories, and I cover his gloved hand.

"I hope they have the *Peanuts* display up." I smile, remembering my favorite lights from our youth.

"You always loved Snoopy in that one." Mercer's grin shines in the moonlight.

Families on the streets that go all out always have themes from our favorite nostalgic kid shows to young adult fantasy renderings of the holiday magic. There's a house that goes full Clark Griswold, and another that trusses up their house like a real-life Hansel and Gretel's cottage. It's a sight to behold, and especially as children, brought so much wonder and magic to the season.

Now, it's just a fun way to melt into Christmas. And for many of my peers, get drunk with our high school classmates on other people's lawns. I planned on drinking tonight, at least

a little hot toddy or something. But with Charlie sick and Mercer by my side, I don't feel much like supplementing my mood with alcohol.

If tonight is the only "date" I get from our winter fling, I am seeing it all through sober eyes.

Mercer parks the golf cart a ways out, the streets lined with them, and we walk hand in hand up to the streets, already emitting a beautiful glow. One thing I've always loved about us is that there isn't this pressure to fill the silence with talk. Even though we've been apart for a number of years, we discover things organically about each other. Our time spent on the farm has caught me up to everything that's been going on in Mercer's life, and I don't feel the need to babble around him just because.

When my gaze swings to him, he's watching me with a small smile ghosting his lips.

"I'm glad you decided to come with me."

His mood is infectious, making my lips turn up in a grin. "Me too."

For the next twenty minutes, we walk the streets with the crowds, oohing and aahing over the ornate decorations and magnificent lights. Mercer and I wave to some of the residents we know but generally keep to ourselves, and I revel in the one-on-one time I'm getting with him out in public.

Until, of course, we run into a couple of idiots from our graduating class.

"Well, if it isn't the two high school lovebirds," a mocking voice starts at our backs, and I don't miss the way Mercer steps in front of me just an inch when we turn around, as if he's protecting me.

Clyde McGibbon stands before us with two of his brothers, three of his cousins, and a couple girls who hang on to them. They're openly drinking from beer bottles even though there are cops all over this lights display.

"Clyde." Mercer nods, and I notice he doesn't tack on that it's nice to see our high school classmate.

“I didn’t realize you two still messed around,” a voice comes from the back of the group, and I think it’s one of the girls.

She’s slightly familiar and, from the slur of her voice, is definitely drunk. The alcohol is clearly emboldening this group tonight.

“Have a nice night.” Mercer’s hand is on the small of my back as he tries to turn us.

This group of people doesn’t have any right to know our business, nor are we really friends with any of them. Clyde is a dick on his best day, and I can tell Mercer wants nothing to do with dealing with him at this point.

“Not so fast, bro. Have a drink with us. This thing is lame, but it’s the only thing going on tonight, so why not get a little toasted under the lights.” Clyde wiggles his eyebrows as he points to the cooler on the back of their golf cart.

“We just came for the tradition of it,” I explain, trying to inch away from them.

My body has always been in tune with Mercer’s, try as I might to disentangle our soul-deep connection. So I know that not only is he uncomfortable, but he’s downright cringing at standing in Clyde’s presence. It’s been a while since he’s had to deal with some of the more obnoxious characters from our youth.

“Like I said, have a good night. Emily and I are just here to see the lights and now we’re going.”

“Back to your place? Charlie know about this starting up again?” One of Clyde’s cousins has a horrific smirk on his face.

They’re trying to make the threats come off as jokes, and I’m not sure if this is to intimidate us about the tree-off that Clyde has already thrown in Mercer’s face or if they’re just that stupid to fuck around about this.

“You’re going to want to cut it out, guys. There are families everywhere, the cops are crawling, and I wouldn’t



want to give them an excuse to look in your direction,” Mercer fires back with a threat of his own.

“What do you care about this place, anyway, huh? You’re living the life in Miami.” Clyde scoffs.

Mercer squeezes my hand, and it’s becoming clearer why Clyde is starting shit. He’s always been jealous of Mercer, but the closer he gets to the pros, the more it must chafe Clyde’s ass.

“Come on, Russell, it isn’t like you’re gonna end up with the chick you fucked in high school. You’re going pro, man. You can have any model or influencer you want. So much fresh snatch out there, you don’t have to settle for Emily Palmer.”

Clyde cackles along with his family members, and I want to shrivel up into a hole in the ground. Yeah, he’s a drunk asshole, but he hit my insecurity nail on the head.

“If you don’t shut your fucking mouth right now, I’ll do it for you.” Mercer’s voice is deadly quiet, but the brutality in it spears my gut.

Clyde and his goonies don’t catch on though. “Aw, shucks, Russell, I’m just fucking joking. Loosen up, get motherfucking merry!”

The rowdy crowd with him whoops and hollers, but Mercer stays rigid beside me.

“You talk about Emily like that ever again and I’ll make sure you’re drinking that beer through a straw, got it?” His jaw clicks like he’s grounding down his back molars.

“Yo, Clyde, let’s get out of here.” One of his cousins must see the cagey look in Mercer’s eye and begins to pull his oaf of a relative back to their golf cart.

Mercer and I are left standing on a lawn decorated like *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, the mood between us completely zapped. Clyde’s words echo over and over again in my head. I broke up with Mercer in high school along the same lines; I thought that at some point, he’d find someone prettier, funnier, better than me. I see those girls in his Instagram stories or

paparazzi pictures he's sometimes in as an up-and-coming sports star, and my heart would sink. I can't compete with that. I'll never be able to.

"I promise, that's not what I think at all. Em, look at me." Mercer's voice sounds pained as he reads my mind.

Reluctantly, I turn my head to look at him. "It's fine, Clyde is just being a drunk jerk. It doesn't matter anyway. What you do back at school is your business, Mercer."

His jaw flexes in anger, and I watch as he shakes his head like I'm dumb for saying something like that.

"Do you understand how beautiful you are? How I'm drawn to every part of you? That the only person I feel like talking to most of the time is you? Yeah, Clyde is a fucking piece of shit, but it doesn't mean I didn't see your face when he said that. It doesn't make it okay for someone to speak to you like that. And if you think, for one second, that I feel any of what he said, you're dead wrong."

Those baby blues bore into mine, as if he's trying to will me to accept what he's telling me.

"And you don't have to say all of that just because he insulted me." Because now I'll never be able to get Mercer's words out of my head, and that will only break my heart worse.

"Yes, I do. You deserve to hear them every damn day." Mercer swallows, and I can tell he wants to say more.

A golf cart zooms down the street, playing a rowdy country Christmas song, and everyone around us laughs and cheers.

"Can I take you back to my place? Please, I want to get out of here. I need to be alone with you." He doesn't touch me, but with how his words wrap around my heart, he might as well be.

"Yes. Please." There is nowhere I'd rather be than alone with him.

We don't have much time left, and if we aren't going to spend it saying the things that need to be said, I'd rather spend it naked with him.

Both of us are walking on eggshells when it comes to feelings, but the connection between us during sex is something we don't have to talk to death. I need that with him at this moment.

Mercer takes my hand and walks us back down the street, away from the crowds and straight to our cart. My heart beats double time the entire way to his grandpa's house. All this pent-up frustration and lust between us is about to go off like a bomb.

With the way Mercer's jaw has been locked since he told off that group, I know I'm about to be at the receiving end of some hot, angry sex. Between that and the compliments he just paid me, I am more than ready to get him alone.



EMILY

**M**ercer's hand is firmly laced in mine as he unlocks the door to his grandfather's house, and my heart stutters as his keys jingle coming out of the lock.

"What if he hears us?" I press myself against his broad back as his feet shuffle onto the living room carpet.

He wraps my hands around his waist, and we move together through the familiarity of this house that used to be like a second home to me.

"Remember? He takes his hearing aids out at night, couldn't hear if the planet was falling on our heads and aliens were taking over," he reassures me as he turns me, and his lips fuse to my neck.

"Why do I feel so much more reckless doing this now than I did in high school?"

It's not as if we haven't hooked up and had sex in Mercer's childhood bedroom dozens of times throughout our relationship. We were one of the only couples back then who had a guaranteed make-out spot because his grandfather could barely hear and went to sleep at eight thirty. But we aren't together anymore, not like that. This feels dirtier or somehow more scandalous.

"Because we're much better at sex, therefore louder. Harder. Faster." His growl sounds in my ear as he presses me to the closed front door.

"*Mercer.*" I all but moan.

He starts to strip me, methodically unzipping my coat and removing my winter gear before pulling my sweater over my head.

“You think I’d want anyone else when I have you? Fucking look at you. You’re the most gorgeous thing I’ve ever seen in my life.”

He can’t mean those words, but they set my blood on fire, nonetheless. Even after coming in from the below-freezing temps outside, my skin is scorching, my core about to go nuclear, and he hasn’t even touched me yet.

I claw at his clothes, disjointedly removing them while his hands dive into my bra. A garbled sound comes from my mouth as he buds my nipples with his cold fingers.

“You’re way too good at that.” I pant, the sensation he’s creating sending lightning bolts straight to my core.

“I dream about your boobs.” Roughly, he pulls the cups down to expose them.

Silky blond waves meet my chin as Mercer bows his head to draw one of my nipples into his mouth, and I fist my hands in the locks. His scent of sandalwood and musk and the outside chill of the air mix for a heady combination until my knees buckle.

Not bothering to release my breast, he hauls me up until my jean-clad legs straddle his waist.

“Oh God ...” My head drops back to the door as he works me over with his hot mouth.

“I need to get you naked now before I embarrass myself.” Mercer carries me to the back of the ranch, to the bedroom I’ve been in countless times.

Knowing that I affect him like this, even though he’s a sex god, gives me a boost of confidence that borders on cockiness. It’s why I slide down his body the moment his bedroom door closes and position myself on my knees.

“I haven’t gotten to taste you again. Remember the first blow job I gave you?” I slowly unzip his jeans and pull them

down his muscled thighs.

Mercer's eyes spark, the low light of the lamp on his bedside table washing us in shadows.

"I nearly fainted your mouth felt so fucking good." He palms my jaw, the lust channeling between us reaching a fever pitch.

"Try to stay upright this time." I wink.

Fucking wink. Who do I think I am? The gorgeous girl he can't resist, apparently. And I don't miss the shiver that rolls through him at my words.

As soon as I pull his black boxer briefs down, admiring the smattering of hair and the trails of muscles on his legs and abs, his cock pops free to greet me.

I chuckle as it bounces off my cheek, and Mercer hisses above me, gathering my hair up in his fists. Testing, I give the head of his dick a little kiss, coming away with a drop of precum on my lower lip.

"Nearly every time I jack off, my mind ends up here. With you on your knees, your mouth around my cock, those beautiful hazel eyes looking up at me." His voice is hoarse as he rasps the words out.

Instead of a response, I swallow him whole. Well, as much as I can take of him, anyway. Mercer is huge and only seems to have gotten bigger in the time we've been apart, though I'm not sure how that's possible. My hand pumps as I suck him into my mouth, the wet pop of my mouth off his tip echoing in the room.

"Fucking perfect." Mercer encourages, canting his hips in time with my rhythm.

Sex between us has always felt like more, even when we were idiot teenagers with no clue what to do. We've been kidding ourselves the past weeks, trying to pretend that this fling is just that. We both know the feelings between us are so intertwined they'll never be untangled.

Come on, we were home for all of a couple days before we couldn't help ourselves and kissed behind Baker's. Part of me knew, even back then, that Mercer's claws would never fully come out once they were in me. He's anchored himself to my soul, and it was only a matter of time before we couldn't fight the pull anymore, being so close in proximity.

"Come here," he growls, nearly throwing me across the room until I land with a thud on his mattress.

Mercer stalks toward me, completely naked now, his cock throbbing as it juts into the air like a proud sword.

"Watching you suck me like that has me on the verge of coming in your mouth, and I don't want that right now." He breathes into my skin as he prowls up the bed.

Deft fingers unzip my jeans and pull them slowly down my legs as Mercer stares at my breasts, hips, waist, face. It's like he's trying to memorize every inch of me.

"Plus, I want to taste you more than any flavor I've ever eaten." That devious smile has my insides flipping with anticipation.

That muscled, lean, athletic form traps me beneath him before diving between my legs, his tongue darting out to lick me. A moan bursts from me as Mercer works me, my back arching until the muscles strain.

"So fucking delicious," he mutters, his teeth scraping my clit.

Groans and moans are working their way from my throat before I can control them, he's feasting on me so good. Adding one finger, then two, then three, it's like I'm floating off the bed with how intense the orgasm builds inside me. That coil is about to snap, and I shut my eyes, fighting against the overwhelming sensations that threaten to drown me.

"Those fucking sounds you make drive me crazy, Em." His tongue flattens over me, and I see stars.

"Mercer!" The yelp flies from my mouth.

"That's it, say my name as you come on my lips."



Holy fuck, he's too good at this. Those dirty words drive me right over the edge, my inner walls constricting around the fingers he stuffed me full of.

My entire body tingles, limbs vibrating, as I come on his mouth and fingers. The release is heavenly, light exploding before my eyes as my core sings with devastating relief and ecstasy.

I'm barely conscious of Mercer reaching into his side table for a condom, but then he's lining up at my entrance. That big cock nudges between my folds, and I gasp, my eyes flying to him.

"You okay?" His eyebrows crease in concern.

"Better than," I assure him.

He slides in slowly, watching my face for every reaction as my body lights anew with the flames only he can produce from it. When he's fully seated, lodged all the way inside me, he lowers himself until his entire body covers mine.

Our hands lock on each other's cheeks, making it so that we can't look anywhere but at each other. And then Mercer bends, giving me a searing, passionate, firm but lazy kiss. His tongue invades my mouth, and our tastes mix as we move our lips over one another's. I'm locked like that, losing myself in this kiss, as he drags his cock out and strokes back in.

There are no words as we move together, him building his thrusts with each push back into me. This isn't fucking. It's not ruddy, drunk sex with an ex.

No, this feels more like making love than anything I've ever experienced. This feels like Mercer worshipping my body, like he's trying to erase all the ugly words and sentiments Clyde had put out there.

We stare into each other's eyes as my body welcomes his, and it's like we're conveying everything we need to in the silence. My moans are our soundtrack, Mercer's growls are the backup track. My fingers tighten on his back muscles, holding on as he moves swiftly like he's on a mission to make me come again.

Only when he bends to kiss me again do I reach it, that ever-elusive second orgasm, and it detonates like it's trying to destroy me. Like it's trying to fry my brain.

I'm nothing but sensations and limbs, pure, unfiltered satisfaction reaching every pore in my body. My eyes flicker open, hazy, and half-lidded, just in time to watch Mercer go rigid with his release. Every beautiful muscle he's built tenses and then releases, his abs quivering as he spills into the condom.

The entire time, his eyes never leave mine. We exist on some other plane, away from this earth, just the two of us. Long after we've both come, we're still connected in the same exact position, our breaths mingling as our eye contact refuses to cease.

I need to break the tension. I need to evict some of the seriousness from this room. Or else I'll end up saying something I regret, like I love you and want to be with you forever, no matter what our futures hold.

Those are words I can't say and things I can't wish for, so I go for humor, knowing it will ease the moment.

"Thanks for lighting up my display." I giggle as I push him off me.

"Not again with these awful Christmas sex puns." He sighs, rolling, but I hear the smile in his voice.

He pulls me into him, my head resting on his chest as the sweat cools on our naked bodies.

"Thank you for taking me in the golf cart tonight." My pointer finger draws lazy circles around his pecs.

"I'd do most anything for you, Em."

That shouldn't make tears lodge in my throat, yet there they are.

I'm on the verge of sleep when I realize I'll need to explain why I didn't come home. Maybe Charlie will be too hazy with sickness to realize I spent the night out. No matter what punishment the morning holds, I'm not getting out of this bed.

For one night, I'll let it all go. I'll forget my cheating ex, my breakdown, the anxiety that refuses to quit. I'll stop comparing myself to any other girl Mercer could get or obsess about his future that I won't be a part of.

The only thing I'll drift off thinking about is being here in the arms of the only boy I've ever truly loved. After all, there are only so many nights left to do so.



## MERCER

**I**t's strange to be in my hometown, resting, with not much on my plate.

For the last three and a half years, my life has been focused on one goal: making it in the pros. Sure, there have been little side goals along the way: winning national championships with my college teams, getting the interest of scouts, and making a name for myself in the soccer world. Since I was injured, the goal has been to come back at a hundred percent strength.

But never, in all that time, have I had a period where I've just been idling. Summers have been spent with special training programs or at exclusive, invite-only soccer camps. Breaks are usually filled with games, team bonding, or making up work I need to graduate on time.

So it's been weird to have so much downtime, especially in a place I haven't occupied since college started. The break has given me this false sense of calm, almost as if I'm in the eye of a storm. It's only in quiet moments, like when I'm out in the far reaches of the farm cutting down trees that I get in my head about all that's to come.

While my knee has felt good, and Grandpa hasn't scared me with his health stuff again since coming home for the holidays, I'm weary about gearing up for the most competitive part of a college athlete's career. There will be so many eyes on me and judgment about my play. I've already seen reports that I might not have the wherewithal to compete

professionally because of my injury. Having to prove skeptics wrong, along with the owners and coaches who may sign me to a contract, is intimidating and already exhausting.

If I didn't fucking love this sport so much, I wouldn't go through with it. But alas, I've eaten, slept, and breathed this game for as long as I can remember, and I cannot imagine doing anything else for my life's work. Being on that field is what drives me. Competing and devising strategies with my teammates is my dream job.

I've heard other athletes say in interviews that once the sport becomes a job, once you feel a strain or pressure to do it rather than the joy it normally brings you, you should walk away. Someday, I probably will feel like that. But right now, I'm giddy as hell to make soccer my real-life career.

I'm just a little nervous about all that comes with it.

Or maybe I'm nervous about what I'm leaving behind.

Emily and I are in this limbo where we're having mind-blowing sex, joking, and talking like we're back to the old us but avoiding any conversations that lean toward anything serious. I'm not acknowledging that I acted like a caveman at the lights display, she's not acting like she asked me to be her fuck buddy and nothing more, and we're both not acknowledging that I outlawed us from telling Charlie.

We're stuck in a purgatory we've created, and one neither of us wants to destroy by talking about. Because if we have to discuss real feelings or futures, that means we can't continue to fuck each other senseless when the blinders come off.

I'm driving through the farm, contemplating all of this, when I hear a shout from somewhere close by.

"It's too cold to be out this far!"

Rounding the row, I see a man, a woman, and two daughters standing in front of a mammoth tree. A tree way too big to take home, but I see families try it every day. Every so often, Emily's mom or dad will get a call blaming them for a tree falling over and destroying half a family's ornaments,

even though we warn that it can happen with these enormous ones.

“Hey, folks, can I help you?” Emily rounds the other side of the row, and my heart rate picks up by the mere sight of her.

I turn off my engine and walk toward the group as well, not able to leave now that she’s here. Even one more second in her proximity fills me with something I know I’ll have to give up soon.

“Hi, uh ...” The dad stares at Emily with relieved distraught.

“I’m Emily, my parents have owned this farm my entire life. What’s your name?” Em bends down to the smallest daughter.

“Gia and I’m six!” She twirls around in a puffy pink coat.

Her mother looks on adoringly at the little girl. “It’s our first year picking out a tree as a family. See, we just got married, and we all moved into a new house, and—”

“And my life is ruined. Yeah, yeah, she doesn’t want our life story, Janelle.” The oldest daughter rolls her eyes and directs the dig at the woman.

Okay, clearly, that’s her new stepmother.

“Delia!” her father scolds, but the teenager rolls her eyes again.

She doesn’t look to be a high school aged girl, more like someone in middle school with hormones and teen angst raging.

“Thank you so much for your offer to help.” Janelle, the mother, beams at Emily.

“I can cut it down for you, as well, if that’s easier.” I walk up with a handsaw to demonstrate.

“Would save me from tweaking my back.” The dad chuckles, and Janelle gives him an adoring smirk.

“We just want the most special tree, and we thought getting a big one for our vaulted ceilings would be best, but

now I'm not sure. It's awfully big."

"Whatever you want, darling." The dad looks at her like she hung the moon.

"She would like the more expensive one." Delia scoffs.

Her new stepmother's gleeful expression drops, and the little girl next to her stops spinning. Of course, the little girl doesn't understand what her new stepsister is saying, but I can realize a kid who knows fighting when I see it. I might have been too young, but I heard those phone calls between my grandfather and my biological parents. I knew when shit was bad and what he tried to shield me from.

This little girl has seen some stuff, and this blended family is probably her first try at a "normal" family life. It's clear as day that she idolizes her new older sister, and the middle schooler is just coming off like a brat.

"Why don't you guys go check out that one?" Emily points a few trees down. "It looks a bit smaller but is still in the same family as this one, and the branches will be great for lots and lots of princess ornaments."

Gia gives an excited squeal and pulls her mother and stepfather down the row to look at the tree.

"I know it's probably not easy to spend Christmas with this new family. It's probably a little strange, huh?" Emily addresses Delia now, who is looking at her cuticles like they're more interesting than any of this.

The girl shrugs, attitude radiating off her.

"I'm sure it isn't easy to have a new person in the house, especially when that person is your father's new wife," Em hedges, and Delia shrugs again, this time turning her back.

A frustrated look passes over Emily's face, and I know she's annoyed that she can't get through to this girl. Dealing with families on the tree farm is a lot less "cutting down a tree for them" and a lot more handling personal problems so that they can get through that and reach the merriment of the tradition.



Except, this isn't a problem that a girl who comes from a loving family with a beautiful childhood can relate to. No, that's something I'm acutely attuned to.

"This new house and family thing probably sucks to you, doesn't it?" I insert myself.

"Mercer ..." Emily's tone is all caution.

"Yeah," Delia murmurs, her eyes flashing up at me for a split second.

I nod, knowing how that feels.

"Holidays haven't always been the greatest in my house. It's always been my grandpa and me; there were some years I would have killed to be able to spend it with my parents. They just weren't around though, and after a while, I realized it was better that way. Things don't always have to be normal, but normal is boring. And I say, the more the merrier. Check out Gia's face when she's around you sometime. That little girl looks like she's so happy to have a new big sister. Take it from me; I spent a lot of years wishing things were different. Wishing that I was somewhere else or was surrounded by people who weren't there. But I realized, maybe too late, that my life was good just the way it was. The holidays are about putting stupid stuff aside and seeing the good in the world, with the people who choose to spend them with you. I'd argue you've got a pretty cool setup now, it even came with a little sister. Today, this week, on Christmas, maybe you just try out being nice to Janelle. See where it gets you. But again, I'm just spitballing here."

My nonchalance is meant not to spook her, but when I look over at Emily, there are unshed tears in her eyes. I shake my head just the slightest bit, trying to convey that she needs to play it cool. While I just admitted something I've never quite said out loud, it was meant to make Delia feel better, not spark an emotional conversation between Em and me.

Delia seems to weigh my words for a few moments and then looks up at me. I can't read her expression but hold my breath for my attitude.

“Dad?” Delia calls out, then points to the tree opposite us. “I think this one might be good. And Janelle, it’s even got the perfect point at the top for your star.”

I give the tween a discreet thumbs-up at her show of an olive branch and then internally sigh that my pep talk didn’t go to waste. Her family comes clambering over, with Gia doing ballet twirls in the snow, until she crashes into Delia with a giggle. The older girl smiles down and steadies her, and I feel something loosen in my chest.

“It’s perfect.” Janelle nods at her, giving her stepdaughter a hopeful smile.

“Thank you.” Her dad mouths the words at Em and me.

We help them cut it down and tag it, then I transport it to the front while Emily walks them to the barn to pick out some ornaments.

She finds me on the side of the barn, where I’m taking a short break after a busy morning of heavy lifting.

The moment our eyes lock, she’s jogging at me, and I open my arms for her. The thud of our jackets colliding has me holding on to her, and then Em is nuzzling into my winter gear.

I know what this hug is for, yet I can’t talk about what I said to Delia.

“We make a good team,” I murmur against her temple.

“Always have.” She rubs my back in response.

A beat passes before she speaks again.

“For the record, you have always belonged here. I would never want you to be anywhere else, with anyone else, during this holiday.” Emotion clogs her voice.

Something in me yearns so desperately to have her tell me she doesn’t want me anywhere else, with anyone else, for the rest of time. Not just for Christmas. Not just for this year.

But again, these are things we’re not touching with a ten-foot pole, and I’m not about to ruin the last good year we have

if this is all I get.



## MERCER

**W**hen Tim set up a meeting of sorts for me in the city, I was reluctant to take it.

It's so close to Christmas, which means getting into Manhattan will be a nightmare. With only days left until the holiday, I don't want to leave the Palmers high and dry for employees. Getting home late to Grandpa, when I'm the one who normally makes sure he eats dinner and takes his pills while I've been home on break, isn't ideal either.

Then there is the fact I only have so many more days left with Emily, and the countdown clock in my head seems to chime with doom every hour I lose.

But I know it would be a mistake not to meet with these soccer legends, some of whom have been absolutely lighting up the league the past couple of seasons. So, into the city I trudge, to some fancy bar that will leave me feeling out of sorts and stodgy.

While I love a party every once in a while, especially the warm weather, outdoor ones in Miami, I want to be close to home during this break. Moving in the massive crowd of people clogging Manhattan this week isn't exactly ideal, but I pull open the door of the restaurant and lounge Tim gave me the address of.

A gust of heat hits my face as I transition from the frigid temps outside, and I unwind my scarf as I look around.

The three guys from the pro team in New York wait for me at a table near the back. You can hear the buzz around them,

with every patron in the bar's eyes swinging to them every few seconds. They sit oblivious, or maybe they're just used to it, as they laugh at some joke one of them told.

Carter Prax is one of the best goalies in the league and has a record number of clean sheets. Theodore Klein is a hotshot striker who has deals with top sportswear brands; you can't travel into most cities without seeing his shirtless billboards. Then there is Dominic Yates, a living legend rumored to retire next year.

These guys are American soccer royalty and even won a world championship for our country a few years back. Meanwhile, they agreed to meet with me about my future. It feels surreal, and being in their presence makes me happy I agreed to come.

"Mercer, man, nice to meet you." Carter stands and ushers me over.

I shake their hands as we introduce ourselves, and Theo pours me a glass from the bottle of scotch they ordered. It goes down with a burn that's smooth at the same time, and I relax into the velvet bar stools they've commandeered.

"So, you're the young blood that's going to take my job, huh?" Theo smirks.

His bluntness surprises me, though it shouldn't. I've heard this about him. And while he's brash, I've heard he's also a genuinely nice guy, so I grin at him and say, "Yep."

Carter chuckles. "Watch yourself, Theo. You'll be an old man like me soon."

"Never." He smirks again and gulps the rest of his scotch.

"It's a long shot you'll be signed by New York, anyway." Dominic regards me. "We don't have the budget right now. Plus, you were passed over in the draft."

"Was trying to go number one," I confirm.

"Not with that injury." Carter gives me a sympathetic nod.

"Hey, don't kick the kid when he's already down." Theo looks affronted by his teammate. "You could still get signed."

I shrug it off. “I’m trying. A lot of people didn’t even think I’d make it this far, so I’m just doing what I can to play the sport I love.”

Dominic’s eyebrow wings up. “I like that attitude.”

“Tim said you were a good one, now I can see why. Keep that attitude in the league and it’ll suit you well,” Carter advises.

“Shit, I almost peed my pants on draft day. I didn’t want to play overseas and knew that American soil was where I wanted to play. When I got the call I’d been drafted, I think I passed out on my mom’s couch.” Theo full-out laughs.

“You been working with Tim? Your private trainer? That’s important if you want to get to the next level,” Dominic asks.

“Stop grilling him, old man. Jeez, you two. Let’s get the kid drunk, take him to a members’ only club. Maybe grab some dancers, some girls, light this evening up.” Theo rubs his hands together.

“You do realize it’s three days from Christmas and I have kids to go home to, right?” Dominic rolls his eyes.

Theo grins in my direction. “But I don’t. You only live once, as they say.”

“Do you guys go out in the city often?” I ask, wanting to know more about their downtime.

In the off-season, I’m hoping I can get a private trainer to work with me somewhere near Queenwood so I can be with Grandpa.

“I do, but these two tend to stay closer to home,” Theo answers.

Carter pops a few of the cashews that are sitting in a gold bowl between us in his mouth. “I’m a little more lenient on myself during the off-season when it comes to partying and dating, but we all work out every single day. Whether it’s something light like yoga or Pilates, or intense field conditioning and drills, we’re always putting the time in. Even when you’re not playing games, this sport still comes first.”

I know that. I'm ready for it. But it's still intimidating.

"I've got a wife and kids at home. The only thing I want to do is spend as much time with them before I have to go back out on the road." Dominic is known as a big family man in the league.

I relate to that, too. The more time I spend with Emily, the less I want to go back to school. It's not the same as the league would be, but I'd be lying if I said I haven't pictured what our future could look like. Me, playing soccer, her getting a nursing job. Coming home to her after road trips and getting lost in each other before we have to go back out into the world and do our jobs. Getting married. Starting a family.

When it comes to her, I've dreamed about it all.

"Don't fall into that trap, man. You're young, single. Fairly good-looking, if I say so myself. Don't get wifed up." Theo's expression is grave, like getting into a relationship could cause deadly harm.

"Dude, don't listen to him. He's a fuckboy. We all know that. I won't lie though, it's a rough lifestyle to have a family in." Carter nods, picking at his napkin. "I was close once, but it didn't work out. Sometimes it's easier to put that all on the back burner."

"Dude, are you insane? Don't listen to him. The lifestyle is awesome. Traveling, playing soccer almost every fucking day. Chicks wherever and however you want them. Free shit, endorsements. You're going to be a king, man." Theo holds up his hand for a high five.

I reluctantly slap it, all my worries amplifying.

"Listen, if you want to maintain who you were before getting into the league, you can do it. But it's hard work. Theo is right, there is a lot of temptation and not everyone can handle that. Some guys lose their wives, some lose their families. Some fall into some shady shit. You have to keep a tight hold on who you are at your core, not who this league will build you up to be. It's not easy, and not everyone on the periphery of your life will want to come along for the ride."



Dominic is the voice of reason, but his words don't make me feel any better.

“Listen to us, a bunch of handsome gentlemen in this merry bar telling this young gun what a horrible time he'll have as a professional athlete.” Carter chuckles. “We're just saying, be careful. And if you need any guidance, come to Dom or me. Don't go to Theo.”

“Hey!” Theo throws a cashew at his teammate's head.

As they move onto other topics of conversation, I can't help but get stuck on what both Carter and Dom said.

It's just another sign that I should leave this thing between Emily and me alone. Let it die out as winter break ends. With her mental health, my schedule, and our undecided futures, it's best if we part with fond memories and not shouting matches or screaming, crying fights.

After all, there are too many pitfalls to avoid going into the league with someone I hold so dear. If something caused us to fall apart, and this time it was my fault, I could never forgive myself.

On the spot, I decide that the fantasies I have around Emily and I being together are just that. Dreams. Whims. Things that will never come true. She asked for one final fling. We're keeping each other company during the cold months, and that is all.

Once reality comes back into view, I'll move on without ever pressuring her for more, for both of our sakes.



“All right, let’s get this shot out of the way.”

Gen passes a bunch of small glasses around and dots my wrist with a dollop of chocolate syrup.

“Why did we agree to this again?” Charlie’s face is nearly green.

“You hate mint, I don’t understand why you’re still doing this?” I scoff at my brother.

A couple other high school friends stand in our circle, the noise from the bar drowning out any more complaints about Gen’s one rule for this Christmas bar crawl she put together. Whenever we enter a new establishment, our group has to take a shot of peppermint schnapps, followed by a lick of chocolate syrup. She’s calling it a Peppermint Patty shot and said it was a festive way to get drunk during the holidays.

It’s not doing much for me except giving me wicked heartburn.

“It’s the rule. And if someone says there is a rule, you follow the rule.”

“You’ve rarely followed rules in your life,” Mercer juts in, raising his eyebrows.

“When it comes to shots and bar crawls, I follow all the rules. Happy holidays, hoes!” my brother shouts the battle cry Gen assigned us every time we take a shot, then tips his glass back.

I follow suit, cringing as the liquor slides down my throat and then lick the chocolate sauce off my wrist. The reindeer headband I have on jingles, the little bells affixed to it moving as I cough after the shot.

“These don’t get easier with each bar,” I complain.

“Good thing we’re done, because it’s the last stop!” Gen throws her arms up and starts gyrating to a sexy Christmas song—who knew those existed—before disappearing into the crowd.

When my best friend from high school proposed this bar crawl, I shied away from it. The last thing I wanted to do was drink myself silly on a random weekday during sunshine hours. Honestly, the only thing I want to do these days is spend every minute away from the farm with Mercer. But Gen pestered me, got Charlie on board, and now here we all are, three sheets to the wind in our hometown where we could bump into anyone we know.

A tray of cookie-flavored martinis makes its way to me, and I grab one, knowing it’ll thankfully be my last drink. I’ve had enough holiday-themed liquor today to last me a lifetime. Although I must admit, the festiveness of the day has me in full Christmas mode.

Everyone is dressed in Santa costumes, holiday headbands, reindeer noses, and anything else that resembles a merry tradition. We’ve been singing holiday songs all day. There has been an air of that magic of the season just floating around our group and anyone we come in contact with. Even though I mistakenly judged it at first, this bar crawl has been fabulous.

What makes it even better? The hunky guy wearing a Santa hat and tight black thermal who always has his eyes on me whenever I look his way.

Mercer stands a few stools down the bar, casually pressing a beer bottle to his lips, but his eyes are all business. They move up and down my body with unfettered perusal, and I flush with heat at his attention. He’s been doing this all day; it’s like festive foreplay using just his eyes, and I am

extremely unsettled that I'll probably explode the minute he touches me.

The crowd opens up as the DJ shouts for all the sexy elves to please find the dance floor, and suddenly, he's stalking me as he moves closer.

"You have some chocolate syrup on the corner of your mouth and I want to lick it off." Mercer's eyes dilate with lust.

"That won't make us hooking up obvious at all or anything." I chuckle.

He moves in a smidge closer, making my core clench. I know what he can do with the tongue he wants to use to lick that sauce off my mouth, and in my tipsy state, I might just let him haul me to the bathroom.

"You smell like a Christmas cookie."

"Gingerbread martinis." I hold up my glass.

"Makes me want to eat you," he murmurs, rubbing a big hand across his jaw.

God, why is it so fucking hot when he does that?

"It's a good thing I'm going back to your place after this, then, isn't it?" I lick around the rim of my glass, lapping up the sugar.

"Watch it, Em. I might just make you scream my name in the bathroom if you keep taunting me like this."

We're always on the same wavelength.

"Stop eye-fucking each other and come dance with me!" Gen pops up out of nowhere.

My cheeks burn so harshly they might be purple at this moment. My childhood best friend has to have caught on to something, or she wouldn't be saying this. I know she won't out Mercer and me, but it doesn't mean I'm not embarrassed that we're literally about to tangle our tinsel in a public restroom.

"I'll be back." I'm nearly breathless as she drags me off, and I can't break eye contact with Mercer, who still looks like

he wants to swallow me whole.

Gen holds my hips and makes me shake my ass to the holiday pop song until I'm laughing so hard I can barely stand up straight. The whole crowd begins to gallop around like reindeer at one interlude, which I'm not familiar with but copy because it looks so fun.

My gaze roams until I find him standing a head above the rest of the patrons. He's still nursing that beer and rocking the Santa hat in a fashion that makes me way too horny about a fictional character who delivers presents down chimneys.

It's not until a moment later that I recognize that he's standing against the bar chatting with a girl.

She's nearly as tall as him and rail thin with all the right curves and fire engine red hair. She's outfitted in a naughty Santa outfit that barely contains her bits and is so clearly flirting with him that you'd have to be blind not to notice.

The redhead flicks her hair over her shoulder and giggles, and I watch as she almost reaches out to ghost a hand over Mercer's arm. He must not notice this, the body language signs she's putting out there, because he smiles good-naturedly and keeps talking.

This is how his life goes; beautiful girls come up to him all the time, and he chooses whether or not to devote more time and energy to them.

Sweat slicks the back of my neck as my chest rattles with something like a cough that's trapped inside. A sick twist of my gut tells me my anxiety is creeping in, hanging like a threatening fog just far enough away from my body that I think I can beat it on my own.

My issues are my own, I know that. I know I'm making more of him talking to a woman in this bar than what's happening in reality, but my past baggage can't compute that. All I see in front of me is Rich and the slimy thing he did to betray me. My mind can't separate the two.

I gulp down more of my cocktail, thinking it'll calm me or wet my dry throat, but it does the opposite. The alcohol floats

at the base of my throat, mixing with my nausea. Images float in front of my eyes, worst-case scenarios that will likely never happen, but I can't turn them off or shut them out.

Mercer must feel my angry glare because suddenly, he's searching the crowd until our eyes connect. I can't help the furious raise of my eyebrows, slicked with sweat, because I can't control my nervous system right now. Those gorgeous blue eyes cloud with confusion, and I watch as the redhead tries to put her hands on him again. This time, he's caught off guard, too busy in a staring war with me, and her red manicure connects with one of his pecs.

Spinning, I nearly smack into a group of rowdy men dressed as Santa's reindeer. I need air. Fresh air. Why is it that whenever I'm in bars with Mercer Russell, I need to escape immediately? The door is in sight as I almost collide with a person in a massive snowman costume, and if this were a scripted show, I'd be the butt of the joke.

The December air slaps me in the face, albeit in a good way, as I finally make it outside. The sun shines off the dusting of snow we got last night, and I shield my drunk eyes from the glare.

Sucking in a lungful, I try to calm myself down. *Inhale for four seconds, exhale for four, inhale for four, exhale for four.* I repeat this mantra to myself as I practice the breathing exercises I've read up on, and finally, my hands begin to stop tingling.

“Whatever you're thinking, you're wrong.”

That deep voice behind me has a laugh of hysteria bubbling from my throat.

“Isn't that what all guilty men say?” My lips feel strange as the words come from my mouth.

Mercer gently turns me until I face him, his hands resting on the red velvet sleeves adorning my arms. “I didn't even realize she was talking to me until halfway through the conversation. I was at the bar trying to get you a water because

you said you wanted one when we made it to our last bar on the crawl.”

A flicker of realization hits me, and I remember I did say that. This morning, when we’d been walking into our first stop on the Christmas drinking tour of Queenwood. Mercer clocked that and wanted to fulfill the request for me.

“Doesn’t mean she had to have her hands all over you.” The stubbornness and delusion of my anxiety won’t let this drop.

He shakes his head. “I can’t control what other people do, but you know I wasn’t touching her. You watched me back away the first time. You, Em, are the only woman I want touching me. Tell me what’s really going on.”

“I don’t know, I’m just feeling weird.” I run my hands through my hair, trying to get out of his reach because I’m still unsure which way is up.

Mercer places two fingers under my chin so I’m forced to look at him. “Listen to me. I am not him. I will never be him. While I’m with you, while I’m the one inside you every day and night, I will never look in the direction of another woman. It’s not even a consideration in my mind. You are out of this world, Emily Palmer. The catch of all catches. I’m unworthy of even being in your presence half the time. Your anxiety has a grip on your mind right now, but you know all of this is true. I just want to make sure you’re okay. But please, trust me when I say I’m not him.”

My heart is a puddle of mush in my chest as a tear rolls down my cheek.

“No, please don’t cry.” He brushes it away.

“I’m just drunk.” I hiccup while trying to laugh it off. “And I know you’re not him. You’d never do that, I’m well aware.”

I’m also well aware that I’ve never stopped being in love with Mercer Russell. Through it all, his name has always been tattooed on my heart. It should have been clear before now, but with that little impassioned speech, he’s completely stolen it



from any man who ever dares try to take it. Not that I can tell him that. We're in this détente where we don't talk about what real emotional feelings we have for each other. Except Mercer just threw that out the window.

“Good. Now, what do you say we get out of here? Go take a nap wrapped up in each other, wake up, and lazily fuck until the sun goes down?” Pulling me into him, those big arms wrap around my waist and sway us both in a saucy, slow seduction.

“Thank you.” I lay my cheek on his chest, ignoring his question. “My brain has a tendency to jump to conclusions these days. And those thoughts just take me the fuck out. It helps that you're here, that you want to take care of me.”

In all the time I've been dealing with my anxiety issues, I've been reluctant to trust anyone to help. I should have known that after telling Mercer, he'd handle it with the utmost care and perfect responses. Goddamn him.

“I'd do pretty much anything for you, Emily.”

The insinuation in his tone has both glee and sadness mixing in my chest. But before I can examine it, Mercer pulls his phone from his pocket.

“I'm calling us a cab.”

“What if Gen and Charlie realize we left together?”

The frown that turns his lips down makes me feel guilty. “They're drunk, they won't notice.”

What Mercer doesn't add is that it shouldn't matter if they do. That we should stop this charade now, but I am too chicken to call us on it.

“Okay. Then yes to the nap, yes to the sex, but I want to add some ramen in there. Can we get delivery?”

He taps one of those blunt fingers to my temple. “I love the way you think.”

For now, it looks like we're going to move past the emotions and drama to focus on the fun and sexy. Most people would call that the perfect Christmas gift, but it feels like a cop-out the more we deflect.



“M ercer, hop on the ATV with me?”

Emily’s dad sets two saws on the back of his all-terrain vehicle and claps his gloves together. He’s always been an honest, good man who I’ve looked up to. He gave me this job, opened his home, and treated me like one of his own kids on many occasions. When I started dating Emily, he sat me down for an honest talk about respecting her but never gave me that scary father speech because he trusted me.

Coming home to work on the tree farm for this Christmas break has been about so much more than just being close to Emily. It’s like a last love letter to the town that raised me, one I might not be back in for a while. It’s a respect thing when it comes to the Palmers because they gave me so much when they didn’t have to. Goofing off with Charlie during this winter season has been a highlight, and I’ll think back to days like this with fond memories.

Days like today, when the snow is so powdery fresh, it crunches under your boots. When the trees glisten as the sun hits them, and little kids run through the rows talking about what Santa might deliver down the chimney. It’s moments like this, when I can cruise around on an ATV through a wintery landscape, that make me feel so close to home. I won’t forget this feeling when the real world rushes up at me.

“I think I found our winning tree for the tree-off, and I need help keeping it in pristine condition. You’re the strongest set of hands I’ve got, don’t tell Charlie that.” He smirks at me.

“I’d be honored to cut it down with you.” I salute sarcastically, but a sense of pride at his words fills my chest.

We’re about to mount up and ride out to the furthest reaches of the Palmer property when Emily’s mom finds us near the netting stands.

“Honey, there is a supplier on the phone griping about something? I think you handled this one so I’m not sure what they’re talking about.” She holds out the phone to Mr. Palmer.

He huffs in exasperation but takes the landline from her, and I marvel that they still have one. Although Grandpa exclusively uses his landline, so it shouldn’t be a surprise.

“No, no, that’s not what we agreed upon!” His voice raises an octave.

Rolling his eyes at whatever the person on the other end is saying, he pulls the receiver away from his mouth. “This might take a while. Ah, damn. Uh, all right, at least go out and tag the tree so no one takes it? It’s pretty far out, on that plot of land no one ever walks to. But just in case they do, I want it secured.”

At this exact moment, Emily walks by with a bundle of garland in her arms.

“Em!” Her dad snags her by the down puffer. “Go ride out with Mercer and show him the tree I mean for the competition? You’ll know which one by the *x* I marked on the ground.”

His labeling decision sounds cryptic as hell, and I doubt we’ll find it. Em goes to protest because of the load in her arms, but her dad walks off, yelling into the phone.

“I’ll take that to the barn, no worries, sweetheart.” Her mom smiles at her and then gives me a little nod.

I might be imagining this, but I think I saw a glint in her eye.

“I haven’t seen you all day.” Em grins, walking up to me.

“The last few days before Christmas are a fucking whirlwind here, you know that. It’s like everyone who

procrastinated on their holiday decorations swarms the farm in the same hour.”

She chuckles. “It’s been the same in the barn. The only ornaments left are those weird looking ‘Santa on the beach’ ones.”

“The ones that look like he has a boner?” I can’t help but describe the odd decorations.

She points at me. “Those are the ones.”

“All right, should we take a drive and find this mysterious *x* your father is talking about?” I swing a leg over the ATV and pat the seat behind me.

“Funny thing is, I know exactly what he’s talking about and will definitely be able to find it.”

Emily’s arms wrap around my waist as she mounts the seat and scoots closer to my back. Even with all our winter gear on, I swear I can feel the way my body heats when it’s near hers.

Her chin rests on my shoulder as I whip the ATV through the rows, careful to avoid any customers. Once we’re out in the further reaches, I let loose, and Em squeals with delight as I pick up speed. It reminds me of the nights we’d have out here in the summer as teens, causing mayhem on these quads while she held on to me.

A tap on my shoulder and her hand pointing to a spot through the trees has me slowing down until Em yells in my ear that she thinks she sees the Douglas fir her father was talking about.

Sure enough, we dismount, walk a few feet, and there is a red *x* painted in the snow.

“Ah, ’twas more obvious than I thought it would be,” I remark.

“My father doesn’t really do subtle.” Em chuckles.

Out of her coat pocket, she pulls a bunch of red netting, and together, we wrap the middle of the tree to make it look off-limits. This way, if anyone wanders out here, though there is no chance in hell they would, the tree won’t be sold. It’s a

trek, about twenty-five minutes on foot, so the likelihood is slim.

“You think that’s good enough?” I ask, standing back as we finish.

“Yeah, there is no chance anyone is coming out here anyway. Want to go get some hot chocolate from the barn?”

I nod. “Only a few days left for it, so you bet your ass I’m going to drink it every day.”

Except the second I go to fire up the ATV, it stalls out.

“You’re kidding me.” Fucking great.

“What?” Em comes to look at the gauges. “Oh, you’re joking. Dad forgot to fill it with gas.”

I slam my palm into the tiny dashboard of the vehicle. “Dammit. He always does this.”

“He really does.” Her agreement is glum.

She gets on one of the radios we all carry, but the static is heavy, and I’m not sure anyone heard her call.

“Great, now we’re freaking stuck here.” Em kicks a tire.

“We could just walk back,” I suggest.

“It’s freezing and will take forever,” she whines.

That grates on me for some reason, but probably because I’m shivering my nuts off and am now pissed that her dad so carelessly forgot to fill the gas tank.

“You don’t have to be so negative. It’ll be cold either way, whether we stay until someone comes to get us or walk back. Come on, let’s just walk back. We can’t do anything about this, so we might as well try.”

Em’s face morphs into an expression of barely-concealed annoyance and hurt. “What is that supposed to mean?”

For fuck’s sake, the cold is driving her insane or something. “It doesn’t mean anything. I’m cold, you’re cold. We want to get back and there is no gas. So we should just pony up, do the hard thing, and walk back.”

“And I don’t know how to do the hard thing, is that what you’re saying?” I notice the little shake in her voice.

Em runs her hands through her hair as she pulls her winter hat off, and I notice the gesture to be the same one she used outside the bar during the crawl. I have a feeling her anxiety is creeping up on her because of this situation, which is out of her hands. The few times I’ve witnessed this have made me feel so helpless because all I want to do is be able to fix it for her, and I know that’s not possible.

“Emily, I’m not saying anything like that. You need to—”

“I do the hard things when I need to. Because sometimes, no one else will do them.” She gives me a pointed look.

Suddenly, everything inside me halts. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Em shrugs, her eyes all shifty as she paces in the snow. “Just means that out of the two of us, I’m usually the one making the big decisions. Having to live with the consequences, even if I don’t want to.”

“You are turning this into something it doesn’t need to be, Emily.” My voice is a warning.

But she’s not listening. No, out here in the woods, with no one to observe us or judge, apparently, everything she’s been feeling is free to roll off her tongue. In situations that are out of our control, sometimes tempers get the best of us. Clearly, Emily is having one of those meltdowns right now, and I am about to bear the brunt of it.

“When you wouldn’t admit what would have happened if we’d stayed together going into college? I did the hard thing.”

My tongue whips out so fast to lash back at her that I couldn’t stop it if I tried. “You took the coward’s way out, and we both know it.”

Her jaw falls open. “You’re calling me the coward? I’m not the one who wants to hide an entire relationship from Charlie so that he doesn’t lose his wittle best friend.”

She's resorting to baby talk, which shows how far deep in the trenches of ridiculous arguing she's willing to dig us.

"Emily, I'm warning you. You don't want to open this can of worms." My voice is deadly quiet, but she keeps on pushing.

"But wait, we're not in a relationship. I forgot. I had to propose a winter fling to get you to even look in my direction. I'm just your side piece while passing through town, isn't that right? Clyde was right when he said you were biding your time until models and social media THOTs came back into your world. Was this just your way of getting back at me for the high school breakup? Hook up with me to show just how damn unforgettable you are? Get me hook, line, and sinker so that I'd regret every choice I made back then?"

"You're the one who just wanted a winter break fling! That's what this whole thing was. You broke my heart once upon a fucking time, and the fling rule was set in place so you couldn't do it again. Well, that didn't fucking work, now did it!" I throw my hands up, anger flaring from every nerve ending.

"And there it is. Finally! We've been walking on eggshells and now the truth comes out!" She rages right back.

So much for being cold. We could practically light this snow on fire with our tempers.

"Oh, don't talk to me about the truth. You've been keeping your mouth shut just the same as I have. Neither one of us wanted to rattle the cage." I point an accusatory finger at her.

"Fine! So what if I have? If this was the only way I could have you after admitting I made a mistake breaking us up, then I was jumping at the chance. If we only get this month, this Christmas, then I wanted it."

"You don't want just this month. If we're being honest, be one hundred percent," I challenge, folding my arms over my chest.

Because she's the one who chickened out last time, and if we're making confessions, I need her to go first. I need to hear



that she's serious before I put my heart on the line again.

"What do you mean?" Her eyes go wide.

"Tell me what you really want." I'm tired of avoiding the subject.

I'm ready to put it all on the line, but the last time I did that or thought we were solid, she tore it all down. Emily has to be the one to say it first.

"We're about to go back to school. Hundreds of miles apart, crazy schedules, the last semester before the real world ... there are even more reasons not to be together now than there were when we finished high school. Not to mention your soccer schedule, my hours at the hospital—"

"Those are all excuses. Just like the last time. What do you want, Emily?"

"What do *you* want? You're the one with endless options coming your way. Why would you want to be tied down?" She throws the question right back.

My entire body wants to plead with her, so I take her gloved hands in mine and try to shake some sense into her.

"No, you don't get to deflect right now. Tell me you want me. Tell me you're in love with me, that you've never stopped. Tell me that you've been miserable for the last three and half years without me. Tell me that you found your soulmate when you were sixteen and just got spooked because we were so young. Tell me that the past few weeks have been the best of your adult life, and that you don't want them to end. Tell me that we can make this work, no matter what happens. Tell me that it's you and me forever. The two of us making some crazy hectic life together. That's what I want to hear. *That's what I want.*"

Teardrops slide down Em's cheeks, and I brush them away before they can freeze on her skin. So much for making her admit her feelings first. I just put my heart on a silver platter for her, and she might slice it open with a steak knife. I can't regret it, though, since I've been waiting years to word vomit

that to her. At least she knows now, and I won't have any regrets about not making my intentions crystal clear.

A beat passes. It feels like an entire three-hundred and sixty-five days packed into those few seconds, that's how long it feels like Emily is silent. Then she blinks up at me through those impossibly long lashes.

"Of course, that's what I want." Her voice is so quiet that I nearly miss it.

But my heart doesn't. My heart soars at the whispers; the organ somewhere up in the cloudy gray sky it's full of so much hope.

"Emily, I—"

"But how are we supposed to make that work? It's too complicated, Mercer." She shakes her head.

Those three little words are just on the tip of my tongue, but once again, she is doubting us. It makes me want to sink into myself, to not put anything on the line ever again.

"It's only complicated if we make it that way. To me, this is the simplest thing in the world. I want to be with you, you want to be with me. Whatever comes our way, we figure it out."

"We'll be long-distance for who knows how long." She chews on her lip.

Her second-guessing starts to poison me against trying to convince her we could overcome any obstacle.

"Fine, you know what? If you want to throw up every roadblock, then stick with those. Hold them close to your chest, use them as your safety blankets. You were too scared to give us a chance back then, and I guess that's the same conclusion you're reaching once again. Don't expect me to wait around if you're ready to stop being a goddamn coward."

With that, I stomped off in the direction of the barn, which I could just make out over the tops of the trees. My temper flares, and I can't stop grinding my teeth, but it's easier to be angry than to give in to the crushing, devastating heartbreak

I'm balancing on the brink of. An engine sounds in the distance, and the tension in my shoulders lessens. Mr. Palmer must have realized he forgot to fill the ATV with gas and came out to get us.

It's not as if I would have wandered far; I'd never leave Emily out here alone, even with her crushing my heart into smithereens. But now that I hear the rescue vehicle, I pick up my pace.

A walk back alone is just what I need to get my head on straight. To digest the fact that the woman I love will never love me enough to sacrifice it all.

With that, I can finally push my emotions and feelings into a box, seal them tight, and focus on the one future I've always dreamed of.



## EMILY

**B**eing around hundreds of people in the town square is the last thing I want to do right now.

Too bad the tree-off postpones for no one, not even a girl trying to ignore that her heart is hanging on by a limp thread.

“Emily, come over here and help me secure this last popcorn strand?” Mom shouts from the other side of our massive tree.

It took Dad’s enormous pickup to get it here and four men to lug it to the spot in the square where the three trees would be judged. My family has been here since noon setting the thing up, making sure it was secure, decorating it to the nines, and now we’re just putting on finishing touches as the competition is about to start.

The municipal building clock strikes six p.m., and it’s already dark on the snow-covered town square. Queenwood residents stand in circles of friends and families, sipping cocoa and chatting about which tree will be the most beautiful.

All the while, I can’t bring myself to look around and see him possibly standing in the crowd. Mercer let my brother know he has a conflict tonight and won’t be coming to the competition, but it doesn’t mean my head and heart haven’t been thinking about him the entire twenty-four hours since he left me in the far reaches of the farm alone. I had to hide my sobs as Dad drove me back to the barn on his rescue mission after discovering us without gas.

Last night, I'd gotten little to no sleep, instead staring at the ceiling with regret and anxiety wrecking my entire system. My head feels heavy, and my eyes are bleary as I help my mother string up the last strand of popcorn, and then I stand back to take in our unlit tree. My parents have done a beautiful job growing, picking, and theming the tree this year. They went with a classic Christmas theme: silver bells, golden harps, and little angels with ceramic wings. It's done in clear lights with red and green adornments, and while it isn't flashy or trendy, this tree speaks to the essence of Christmas.

"Looks beautiful, Mom." I give her a side hug.

"It really does." She wipes away a tear.

"Are you crying, Ma?" Charlie walks up and rolls his eyes. "You gotta keep a stiff upper lip for the competition. They'll think they've won."

My brother points about twenty feet to our right, where Clyde and his family have been setting their tree up and drinking spiked apple cider all afternoon. By now, their decibel level has reached skyscraper heights, there is trash littering their feet, and I'm pretty sure one of the cousins almost knocked over the tree.

"We'll win by our reputation, friendliness, and commitment to Christmas, or we won't win at all." Mom nods solemnly, like that's written in the town code or something.

"I'm just glad to be going back to school soon so I don't have to deal with that guy." Charlie hikes a thumb in Clyde's direction.

Our high school peer's voice echoes in my head, his words about Mercer and me part of the reason I couldn't ask for what I wanted when the boy I love asked me to name my price. I chickened out and broke both of our hearts in the process.

Mom and Dad walk over to a group of their friends as someone makes an announcement that there will be fifteen minutes before tree lighting and judging starts.

"It's not a secret that Mercer begged off tree decorating duty today. That have anything to do with you?" My brother

skewers me with a look.

“I have no idea why he didn’t show up.” I avoid eye contact as I pretend to primp the branches.

An annoyed huff comes from Charlie. “Do you two think I’m a moron?”

“What?” I’m so tired of having to talk to people today.

All I want to do is sit in my room and wallow, but since that’s off the table, the least my family could do is stop talking to me. God, is it so much to ask?

“Listen, the last thing I want to know about is who you’re boinking, but if you think I don’t realize you and my best friend have started hooking up again, then you must really think I’m a fucking idiot.”

My head whips toward him so fast that I think I might have sprained my neck. “Never say *boinking* in the same sentence with me ever again.”

“Noted. But seriously, I’ve known you two were back together ever since the ski trip. Shit, you really don’t think very highly of me.”

I’m shocked, to say the least. “I ... well, I guess I didn’t really think people thought I was in his league anymore.”

Charlie rolls his eyes. “Yeah, you’re that dumb. I knew it.”

I hit his puffer coat where it covers his arm. “Shut it. I thought we did a good job of keeping it under wraps, though. You know, he asked for us to be low-key because of you. So that your friendship wouldn’t be in jeopardy again.”

My brother takes a slow breath as he looks up at the sky. “Jesus, you guys just couldn’t stay away from each other, could you?”

I shrug, knowing it was impossible not to be with Mercer after spending time so close to him. “Don’t worry, it’s over now. You don’t even have to tell him you know, nothing has to happen, and no one will get hurt.”

“Yeah, you really look unscathed,” Charlie deadpans, gesturing to me. “You forget we’re Irish twins, Emi. I can tell what you’re thinking, we have that twin power thing even being months apart.”

“You always say that and yet it’s completely untrue. You’ve never once been able to get us out of trouble by the twin telepathy thing.” I shake my head.

“Well, I guess I don’t need to read your mind right now, it’s written all over your face. You’re lovesick, or whatever they say. So, do I need to kick my best friend’s ass?”

“No, don’t you dare. Mercer didn’t end things, I did.” Technically, though, Charlie doesn’t need to know all the details.

My brother blinks. “Are you nuts?”

“What?” Again, shock radiates through me.

“Why would you end things? You clearly love the guy. He clearly loves you.”

He says this like it’s the simplest thing in the world.

“It’s just too complicated, Char. Mercer says he wants to be with me, but we both have so much ahead of us. It would be too hard.”

“I’m sorry, I’ve never known you to quit while you’re ahead. Or before even trying! And why would it be such a bad thing if he wanted to be with you? Jeez, Em, Mercer is a catch. I’m a guy, and he wants to date my sister, but even I know that. It’s clear as fucking day that he’s in love with you, that he’s always been in love with you. God, women confuse the shit out of me.”

Shame burns around the edges of my broken heart. “You’re right. About all of it. I’m an idiot, and letting him go will be the biggest mistake of my life. But I’ve been going through some shit.”

Now Charlie studies me, really looks at me, and he lowers his voice. “Are you okay? You’re not ... are you sick?”



The way he says it, I can tell he thinks it's something terminal. Maybe it is. My mind will forever wage war with me, and while I can deploy techniques to help ease my anxiety, there is no cure.

"In a sense, yes. But nothing physically serious. I've been ..." Opening up to Charlie about this makes it more real.

After reading through a lot of material on anxiety, I know that opening up to loved ones and not hiding it also helps relieve some of the symptoms. It helps not to feel so alone or in the dark with mental illness, and sharing my diagnosis is a good thing. But it's still terrifying. I don't know how my brother will react, and I've had enough emotional trauma this week to last me a lifetime.

"What? What is it, Emi?" My brother's voice is tinged with panic.

A sigh heaves from my chest as I resign myself to the fact that I'm going to spill my guts. "I was dating this guy during the fall and he cheated on me. I discovered him in a bathroom, well ... with a girl. It triggered something and I started having a lot of anxiety attacks. It wasn't about the relationship so much as it was about me not being in control or being unable to manipulate the feelings and situations around me. I felt completely untethered, and my mental health got pretty bad. Until I went on medication. I started taking an anti-anxiety pill daily, and it has helped a lot. But it's not linear, mental health never is. I still have bad days, anxiety attacks, a lot of intrusive thoughts and things of that nature. It ... I need to focus on me. That's what I've been doing."

Without hesitation, he envelops me in a hug. "Jesus, Em, why didn't you call me? I would have come."

I know he would have. At the drop of a hat, Charlie wouldn't have hesitated. But I'd been ashamed for a while after I found Rich that night.

"I know. Thanks for reminding me, I just needed to deal."

"Does Mercer know?" he asks, arms still wrapped around me.

I nod into his chest. “Yeah. He’s been amazing about it.”

There’s a pause. “Then I don’t get why you won’t give you two a chance.”

I sigh again. “Because I have enough anxiety as it is. It’s just there, always lurking. It’s hard enough to deal with when I’m not worried about what my potential boyfriend is doing hundreds of miles away. What other females are doing when he’s around, when he becomes a professional athlete. I couldn’t do the long distance once before, this time the doubts and anxiety would eat me alive.”

I’m a big, huge, cowardly chicken. I know that. It still doesn’t stop me from throwing up obstacles that will keep Mercer and me apart. I’m terrified of how I’ll act if we’re in a relationship. I’m terrified that he’ll break my heart worse than I could ever break his.

Charlie pushes me back a little, his face wearing a sympathetic but annoyed expression.

“Emily, this is Mercer we’re talking about. The guy has been in love with you since I threatened to punch him in the nuts in middle school for looking at my sister during the birds and the bees talk in health class. He’s the most loyal, true, supportive person I’ve ever met. I know you’re going through a rough time, but you also have to keep in perspective what you know to be true about yourself, about him, and about how you guys were when you were together. I’d hate to see two people I love be so miserable because they couldn’t figure it out. Just don’t shut him out. Don’t abandon this because you’re too scared of the future. Focus on what you actually know, and I think you might find the courage to actually let yourself be happy.”

A teary smile is directed at him, and I can barely form words I’m so choked up.

“Jeez, that was enough sappy niceness to last me a month. Fuck, I need to go make a fool of myself or something.” He cringes and shakes like he’s trying to get the brotherly love off of him.

“You’re the best of us, Char.” I tilt my head to the side and give him puppy dog eyes.

“Don’t tell anyone else. Or, actually, you can go tell those girls over there. Sing my praises,” he jokes.

“Kids, they’re going to start.” Mom and Dad hustle back over, tittering with excitement.

The whole town quiets down as the mayor gets on the microphone to talk about the holiday season and then announces some township events since she has everyone’s rapt attention. Then the countdown starts, and the three trees being judged light up the space in merry, cheerful brightness.

Whoops and hollers go through the crowd as people start to yell out which tree farm has their favorite entry in the competition. I hear a lot of Palmer shouts, but just as many for the other two. Beside me, Mom is nearly jumping up and down with anticipation while Dad is biting his fist.

The microphone screeches as someone starts talking, and then a big cheer moves through the sea of people as Mom body slams into me for a hug.

The moment they announce that Palmers Tree Farm wins the tree-off, I can’t help but picture Mercer in my mind and think that he should be here, celebrating in this victory that is just as much his doing as it is my family’s.

I also can’t help knowing that it’s my fault he isn’t.



## EMILY

I've never been so miserable on Christmas in all my life.

Not the year I got the flu when I was ten and couldn't go to our family get-together. Not when Charlie broke my princess dollhouse mere minutes after I opened it. Not even that first Christmas home after freshman year of college where I was both anticipating and also fearing seeing Mercer if he showed up in town.

As I stare into the mulled wine Dad served us all while we settled in with our books, I can't help but pout as sadness weighs my chest down.

Our Christmas Eve tradition is not cheering me up even an ounce. Since we were twelve or so, Mom has always bought each family member a new book that we open the night before the holiday. Then, we all settled in on the living room furniture in pajamas and turned Christmas music on the record player before reading at least five chapters before we head up for bed. Charlie protested at first until he found the science fiction genre he was obsessed with.

It's usually one of my favorite traditions, but tonight, I just can't get past the first three sentences of my serial killer thriller.

The only thing I can focus on, the only thing spinning like a top over and over again in my mind, is that I'm throwing away the only boy I've truly ever loved because I'm so damn scared. Mercer was right when he called me out, and Charlie was also right when he echoed the sentiments.

I came home this holiday season a shell of myself, and in no time, Mercer Russell helped remind me who I am. He's been unfailing in his presence and listening. I'm the one who is about to ruin us all over again, if I haven't already. I can end this suffering. I can stop my melancholy and go take a drive over to his grandfather's house to talk to him.

But the self-sabotage, the negative thoughts, the sick-to-my-stomach feeling that won't go away even with the emergency anxiety pill I took an hour ago ... those all stop me. I know this is how I'll feel when he's on the road. I'll always have doubts or questions, even when he's given me no reason to think any of that about him.

"Sweetheart, can you help me in the kitchen for a minute?" Mom taps my foot from where she lies on the other side of the couch.

Coming out of the haze of my endless Mercer thoughts, I nod in confusion but stand to follow her.

She's stopped, leaning a hip on the kitchen island, when I make it into the room.

"What do you need me to do?" I yawn as the question comes out.

"Oh, nothing, I just thought maybe you wanted to talk about Mercer without Charlie and Dad overhearing."

My jaw drops. "Not you too! How did everyone know we were ..."

Telling my mom that I was in a fuck buddy situationship with my ex-high school sweetheart is probably not the way I want to play this.

She holds up a hand. "I don't need details, thank you very much. I just know you two were spending a lot of time together, in the old way, like you used to. It was so obvious, I'm not sure how you two thought you were keeping it a secret."

Mom smiles at me with amused sympathy, and I sigh as I set my elbows on the island and bury my head in my hands.

“Well, we’re not anymore. Not keeping it a secret, that is. We’re not spending time together.”

“Because you ended things again. Ah, my girl, did you not learn the first time?” Mom comes around and rubs a hand up and down my back.

“How do you know he didn’t break things off with me?” I groan.

“Because that boy has always looked at you like you hung the moon, and you’ve been downright miserable even though Christmas is your favorite holiday. That’s a ‘I feel guilty for breaking Mercer’s heart’ miserable, just to be clear.”

“Gee, thanks for the support, Ma.”

She gives me a side hug, and I finally pick my head up. “I didn’t say I thought it wasn’t the right decision. I’m your mother, but you’re an adult now. I don’t get to judge your choices, but I can tell you when you look upset and hurt. And you look that way right now.”

“Did you think it was a mistake the first time I broke up with him? Back in high school?” I’ve never actually asked her that.

Mom was there for the fallout, for me not being able to stop crying the month before I left for freshman year of college. She made sure I was fed, saw sunlight every once in a while, and that Charlie didn’t rag on me too much for breaking his best friend’s heart. But she never once told me I was an idiot or that she approved. One way or another, I never knew what she thought about it.

My mother sighs, and her expression is a war of whether or not she should answer. “I thought you two were very young. I could recognize that your love was real, but it’s never a guarantee that kind of high school relationship can withstand all that college and life brings. I honestly don’t know that you two would have, but I bet you would have made it work. Am I happy you had the freedom to grow and mature on your own separate journeys? Absolutely. Am I sad that you two have seemed to have broken pieces of your heart floating around

ever since? Again, absolutely. When I look at you and Mercer, I just ...”

Mom chews on her lip.

“What?”

“You’ve always struck me as two sides of the same coin. You get each other, and you balance one another out. And the way he looks at you, cares for you? I couldn’t ask for much better treatment of my daughter.” She shrugs. “But again, it doesn’t matter what I think. It matters how you feel and what you can handle. You always have been the kind of daughter who tries to make everything perfect. Whether it was your grades, or the bow on a present, or your relationships with others, or making it so your dad and I could have a few minutes of peaceful alone time.

“Emily, you’ve always been the kind of person who is sacrificing yourself for others. Look at the profession you chose; nursing is a selfless act where you put others’ care and wellbeing above your own on many occasions. But that also means you’re used to shelving any emotion or desire that brings you happiness. It’s hard for you to see when something is so right for you because you’re also a cautious and skeptical person. With everything you’ve been through this year, I don’t blame you for running at the first chance of touching your hand to the stove. A relationship with Mercer is a risk because it’s such a high reward. You love him, so much that I can read how miserable you are all over your face. But you’re terrified. Whatever you choose, know that I’m always here for you.”

There is nothing else I can do but move into my mother’s arms and let her hug me. She holds me like I’m seven and just skinned my knee, all the love and comfort I seek in bad moments seeping into my skin. When all else fails, a good hug from your mom feels like the best medicine.

But I can admit, she just hit me in the head with a metaphorical two-by-four. I need time to pick apart all that she said to me and decide what I want to feel about it and do next. Of course, she’s right on almost all of it, and like she said, only I can choose what happens from here.



With how miserable I've been feeling, I can't sit and wait for too much longer. Still, that ever-present fear of the unknown rattles in my bones.

Underneath it, though, is a little shimmer of hope that I'm unconsciously leaning for even if it backfires on me.



“Pass me the syrup, would ya?”

Grandpa’s voice is gruff with sleep even at ten a.m., but I do as he asks.

“Your waffles are already drowning,” I note as he takes the bottle from my hand.

“I’m three quarters the way to the grave, I don’t think a lake of syrup is going to do any more damage than the rest of the shit I’ve experimented with in this life.” He pours more of the sweet liquid onto his breakfast.

I shrug. “I guess you’re not wrong. But you might try some eggs one of these mornings.”

My fork digs into the fluffy pile of yellow protein I whipped up with our feast. Grandpa covers all the gluttonous items: waffles with chocolate chips, bacon, hash browns, and a vat of eggnog whipped coffee. I contributed the fruit salad and scrambled eggs, so neither of us goes into sugar shock or possible cardiac arrest.

“Thanks again for the plane ticket. I can’t wait to come down for graduation.” Grandpa gives me the biggest smile he’s capable of, which is just a twitch of his lips.

This morning, all of twenty minutes ago, because we are two grown men who don’t bounce out of bed at six a.m. on Christmas, Grandpa and I sat in front of the Christmas tree. I pooled all the money I made over the last couple of years working odd jobs and got him a first-class, round-trip ticket to

Miami for my graduation. It might be a hard travel day or two for him, considering the shape he's in, but before he can't do it anymore, I want him to be able to see where his hard work raising me has gotten me.

Plus, he'll never say it, but I know Grandpa is immensely proud that I am the first in our family to graduate from college. He never had the opportunity, and it isn't like my parents had bothered with their educations. Staying at my university as long as I did, rather than going to play soccer overseas or something, partly had to do with fulfilling his dream that I get a degree.

"And thank you for the sweater. It's so freaking awesome." I grin because his present is top-tier.

Grandpa had gone to the local library and asked one of the high school interns to help him shop for my gift online. The student helped him order a vintage football sweater from my favorite European team and shipped it to our house for Grandpa. It's incredible, a piece of history, and it is all I could want as an adult who didn't even want his grandpa to buy him a gift.

"Before I don't say anything sappy for the next ten years, I'm proud of you, kid. You didn't have it easy, but raising you has truly been one of the highlights of my life. If I had to go through shit to get to see you grow up, it was worth it." He reaches a burly, gnarled hand over to my shoulder and gives it a slap.

That short sentiment is the equivalent of an emotional diatribe for my grandfather, and a lump forms in my throat.

"I'm a pretty damn lucky kid to have you as my parent." Sure, I lacked a lot of things in life, but I've always known Grandpa loves me wholeheartedly.

Christmas is making us all teary, but I'm giving in to the emotions. This trip home might be my last for a while, and neither of us knows how much longer Grandpa has in this house. I'm trying as hard as I can to just focus on memorizing today.

Honestly, I'm focusing on anything that will keep my mind off *her*.

Between calls with Tim, emails from my college team with details about upcoming games, the national junior team I play on being called in for practice in a month, and enough workouts to numb my mind, I've been trying to keep busy. I've been trying not to sit still or exercise so much that I pass out in a sleep I couldn't possibly wake in a panic from.

Still, through it all, Emily is right there at the forefront of my brain. Her shocked face when I called her out when I admitted the truth neither of us were addressing in the month we'd been home. When I accused her of cutting us off at the knees before we went away to college.

For the second time in my life, the only girl I've ever wanted broke my heart into a million tiny pieces, and I don't know how I'll ever recover. The heartbreak, the ache, and the loss pounding in my chest are always there. Ever present, sharp, and painful. Emily is the only person I can imagine spending my life with, and that possibility is all but gone at this point.

She's not going to allow herself to risk it all just to be with me, and that hurts like hell. I'll jump through hoops for her, scale buildings, take bullets, etc. Even after so many years without each other, during which she claims she missed me like a limb, she won't jump without knowing the landing will be cushy and safe.

So, I've had to try to block it out. Too many things of importance are coming up for me to sink into this melancholy.

"You want to watch the basketball games?" I ask, clearing the breakfast plates when we finish.

"Yeah, why not. The Jersey team is actually doing okay this year."

"Grandpa, they're in New York now." He refuses to get with the times.

"They'll always be from Jersey. Just like you." He points at me. "It's what gives us our feisty, fighting fortitude."

God, I hope he's right. The past few days, I've felt like crawling into a hole rather than come out swinging.

We're lounged on the couch about two hours later, a beer in each of our hands with the sports announcer talking on the TV when the doorbell rings.

"You expecting someone?" Grandpa raises his eyebrows, and I know that he knows I've been in a funk because of Emily.

We've never explicitly spoken about my love life, but I know that my grandfather isn't an idiot. He realizes I haven't left the house in three days or spoken about Emily, for that matter.

"No." I glance at the door, worried and also hopeful about who might be on the other side of it.

There is also always going to be that little part of my brain that whispers it might be my parents coming home at Christmas after all this time to finally know their son. Shaking my head because that idea is ludicrous, I get up and walk to the front door.

When I pull it open, my heart drops.

"Emily?" I'm shocked to see her standing on my front porch, her pink-tipped nose in such contrast with the white background of the snow.

"Merry Christmas." Her small smile looks hopeful and cautious all at once.

"Uh, yeah, you too. What're you doing here?" I honestly thought I might not see her again before leaving for school.

I'd been pretty pissed when I left her out in the far reaches of the farm, and we haven't spoken since. Charlie had texted me to let me know that the Palmers won the tree-off after I'd begged off because I couldn't stand to be in Emily's vicinity.

Emily fidgets with her gloves as she bites that full bottom lip. "It's Christmas. I love Christmas. And for three Christmases now, I've kicked myself for not being with you. For not just getting the hell over my insecurities and self-

sabotage. There were a few times I almost drove over here in the past to tell you this exact thing, but I was too much of a coward. And then this winter break happened, and ...”

My heart is dangling dangerously over a precipice. Either it'll float to safety, wrapped in all the love Emily can give, or it'll dive to the canyon floor, shattering once again. I can barely breathe, I'm hanging on to every word she says. Because she has to be the one to say this, I can't give anymore.

“Yeah?” I prompt.

Her eyes connect with mine. “And I won't go a fourth Christmas being miserable. Or any Christmas to come, for that matter. I'm done being an idiot. I hope you waited for me?”

She gives me back the words I said to her that last day on the farm.

It's everything I've wanted from her. Yet still, as I hang in the doorway and she stands on the porch expectantly, I can't just completely forget the baggage and history between us.

“Why now? What's changed?” I hedge.

A frown flickers over her mouth before she sets it in a determined line again. “Can we go somewhere to talk? Maybe inside. Or in my car, I don't know.”

It's probably awkward for her, standing there in her coat and winter gear while I'm in sweatpants with my grandfather on the other side of the door. Yet I can't budge. I need to hear what she's planned to say and then decide if I can take a risk of my own. I don't want to take the time out to drive around looking for a spot to talk or have her come into my bedroom while Grandpa pretends not to eavesdrop.

“No, tell me. You came here to stop being an idiot, then do it,” I challenge her.

Emily huffs out a breath, a frustrated look directed at me. But she presses on. “Nothing's really changed, honestly. I'm still scared out of my mind about long-distance and the future. I'm nervous about how my mental health struggles will affect our relationship. I don't want your bright future putting my

wants and needs, plus my career plans, in the shadows. I don't want things to end badly for the sake of our mutual loved ones.

“But now, I realized how miserable I am, even with all of those reasons or excuses. I can put up with all the worry and fear if it means I get to be with you. If it means I love you and you love me, then I can deal with my issues because it'll mean you're by my side. It just took me realizing that struggle and strife will always be present. It's who I choose to walk through with them that matters. And ... I love you, Mercer. So much it consumes me in this quiet, ever-present way. I've never not loved you. Since the moment I fell hard and fast when we were teenagers, it's always been you. I'm sorry it took me so long to come to terms with it all. But I love you, and I'm done chickening out.”

Those three little words are like fireworks to my soul. They light me up, excite me, make me feel like magic and wonder aren't just for kids at a theme park. But still, that little voice at the back of my head won't let me accept her words.

“How do I know you won't retract this? How can I trust that you won't end us again, that you won't hurt me because you're running scared?”

My issues come out now, the deeply buried abandonment baggage rearing its ugly head. Not only had my parents done it to me, but Emily has left me twice now. She cut me loose, and even if I want her more than my next breath, I'll always fear she'll do it again.

“Because I'm still scared, yet I'm not running. My knees might be quaking, but I'm standing my ground. Because I want you, Mercer. I want you on the good and bad days, the ones where we can't stand each other and the ones where we can't stand to be apart. I want everything in between. I won't be perfect, neither will you, but we are two sides of the same coin. You complete me. It's just common sense that we be together.”

Emily shrugs as if she's resigned herself to the fact that we're meant to be and that she's had to live with that being our outcome.



As if everything in me isn't a complete mushy puddle at her words. As if I'm not going to give in from the start because I love her more than reason.

"Common sense, huh?" I fight to keep the smirk off my face.

"Who else is going to put up with me screeching like a baby animal anytime I see a spider?" she deadpans.

"And who would venture out in the dead of summer just to get you a certain shade of paint, then do all of the trim work?" One summer, I helped paint her bedroom and did pretty much all the legwork while she admired my ass.

I step toward her, my socks hitting the freezing cold welcome mat.

"Who is going to scratch my back when I get sick? Or fill up the hot water bottle when I have period cramps?" All things I've done for her.

She shifts her feet, moving an inch toward me.

"You know, your coffee drink orders are too frou-frou and complicated for a new guy to learn." My feet are toe to toe with her boots now, my face lowering to invade her space.

"I love you. Only ever you," she whispers, her eyes searching mine.

"Then it's a damn good thing that I'm so in love with you, I'll forgive just about anything you do to me."

Before I can say another word, Emily hooks a gloved hand behind my head and pulls my lips down to hers. My hands find her hips, pulling them toward me as my tongue tangles with hers. The kiss is fast, passionate, soul-soothing, and bone-deep. It's a promise of all that's to come and an apology for all that's behind us.

"Will you invite that girl inside and stop making her freeze her ass off on the porch now?" Grandpa's voice interrupts us.

We both break the kiss in a fit of laughter.

“Maybe his hearing isn’t as bad as you said,” she mutters, referring to our sexual escapades in my bedroom.

“We’ll have to test it out later.” I swoop in to lay one more kiss on her cheek. “We still have a lot to talk about, but yes, Em. I am always going to love you. Everything else, we’ll figure out.”

While yes, there are discussions to be had and logistics to work out, the most important decision has been made. I told Emily I’ll be here waiting if she ever got her shit together. And she did, just days later. We’re not going to make the same mistakes we did as teens; I won’t let her go so easily, and she won’t question our bond.

We’re together now, that’s what matters. The rest? We’ll deal with it as it comes.



EMILY

**M**y basement is full of people playing beer pong, which is not something I thought I'd say after high school.

"Sink this cup and we're into the next round." Charlie says to Mercer, giving him a bro slap on the back.

"You've been playing for an hour." I whine, but I'm warranted.

It's nearly midnight, I just got back together with my boyfriend, and my brother has stolen all of his time tonight. I mean, it hasn't just been me sitting around. Gen made me play a round of quarters with her, we put together a nacho table for our friends who consumed it like the world was ending, and the rest of the party has had fun commenting on the celebrity interviews on the various New Year's Eve broadcasts.

But still, I want my boyfriend back so we can make out before the ball drops.

"Does someone want attention?" Mercer saunters up to me, grabbing me around the waist with one arm as he shoots the ping-pong ball while simultaneously leaning down to capture my lips.

The groans from the other side of the table let me know he sunk the shot as his tongue invades my mouth, and a few cheers go up.

"How the hell did he do that?" Someone asks in astonishment.

"Dude, that's my sister." Charlie pretends to fake barf.

I pull back. “It shouldn’t be as hot as it is that you just made that, but damn ... I’m turned on.”

Mercer’s eyes flash with lust. “Give me five more minutes and we’ll go upstairs.”

“Again, dude, that’s my sister.” My brother pretends to bend over with nausea.

Mercer keeps me anchored to his side as they finish their game with the twenty or so guests looking on. The tournament started in the early hours of the night, and pairs of friends have been defeated by Charlie and Mercer over and over again.

Our parents always took a weekend trip for New Year’s since their busy season was over and they deserved a vacation. This year, dad took mom to this fancy upstate New York resort with a spa and five-star restaurant. I’m sure she was three martinis in by this point and giggling at everything my father said.

Their departure also meant that our house was the prime party spot for the last night of the year, as it always had been. We’d been hosting this little shindig for years, but it had slowly gotten more and more exclusive as time went on.

In high school, this basement had been mobbed with nearly anyone who caught wind of the Palmer kids having a party. Charlie and I would spend hours de-lousing the place after it ended so that our parents wouldn’t kick our asses.

Then came college, and we spent a lot of our breaks with new college friends or just the few high school ones we’d kept in touch with. The New Year’s party even got paused for a year when Charlie and I opted for parties in other towns with our college friends.

Tonight? There are only about twenty five of us here. A select few from Queenwood or our college circles. No one is going to get so shitfaced that I have to clean up puke, everyone respects our parents and their home, and we won’t be having the cops called for insanely loud music. We’re just having a good time with people we care about without excess chaos and drama.

It's exactly how I want to spend the last night of the year ... well that and having Mercer by my side.

My foot had been jiggling all of Christmas day, jumping up and down like it just couldn't rest until both Charlie and Mom yelled at me to drive over to Mercer's house. They both knew that I couldn't stand being apart from him for another moment, that the words in my brain needed to be blurted out.

Since mom had given me her opinion, I couldn't stop obsessing over how dumb I was being. That she was absolutely correct, and that I loved Mercer so much it was an addiction. So many people in life never got this kind of love, and there I'd been, wasting it.

It only took me two minutes after they'd yelled at me to jump in the car with my heart beating loudly in my ears. On the five minute drive over, I'd psyched myself up to win my man back.

And I'd succeeded, even if he was obstinate at first. When he'd uttered those three little words back to me, it was like the whole world came to life around us. Everything suddenly seemed brighter, my skin felt less tight, my heart was beating to the tune of every love song ever written.

Now, we're trying to make up for lost time with the winter break we still have left.

In the last week, Mercer has spent most of the time trying to get me alone and naked. We only have two more weeks until he's due back in Miami, and we've wasted so much time in past years and during this break not getting creatively dirty. Lord, the things that man can do with his mouth.

It's why I don't push him away when he starts making out with me after they win their pong game. It's why I flick off the people booing and catcalling us while that expert tongue wraps around my own.

Well, that and the three glasses of champagne I've had tonight.

He presses his hips against me, even in a room full of people, and I can feel how hard he is. Normally, I wouldn't be

this forward and raunchy with PDA, but it's New Years, everyone is drunk, and I am head over heels in love with my boyfriend. If I want to get handsy, I will.

"We're just going to get more ... uh ... chips." Mercer's eyes are hooded as he grabs my hand and begins pulling me up the stairs.

"Yeah, sure." I hear Gen's sarcastic voice. "Use a condom!"

"Ew! Gen, gross!" Charlie's digested tone follows me up the basement stairs.

Giggles come out of my throat as Mercer drags me through the house, getting so impatient at one point that he picks me up so I'm straddling his waist.

"Sorry I was playing beer pong for so long." His hand reaches up the back of my shirt as he takes the stairs to my bedroom two at a time.

"I have an idea how you can make it up to me."

"Fuck, but I love you." He growls, grinding against me as we make it to the landing of the second floor.

Turning expertly, Mercer barrels into my room as I suck on his neck, a groan filling the darkness.

Nearly throwing me, the boy I've always loved prowls over my body like I'm the most delicious snack he's ever seen.

Except as his face becomes visible in the moonlight, his expression is more reverent than horny.

"God, you're beautiful." His hands run over my cheeks.

Inside my chest, my heart thumps. I can't believe I almost lost him over how stupid and afraid I was. Our love is so large it feels tangible, like it's another being in this room.

"How am I going to get through the next couple of months without you?" I murmur, inhaling his incredible scent.

"Lots of FaceTime sex." His hands skate up under my sweater and goosebumps pebble my flesh.

“I’m serious. We only just got back together ... how will we do this long distance thing?” It really worried me that I wouldn’t see him for an unknown period of time.

Mercer pulls back. “I know. I hate it, too. But it’s only six months tops. It’s not like it’s the full four years of college. We’re nearly done. And you can fly down to me once and a while, I’ll fly up here. We can meet in the middle for a weekend. We are going to do this; it won’t be easy, but it’s worth it. So worth it. I promise it’ll go by quickly.”

I nod, tears dotting the corners of my eyes.

“Plus, we’re going to be experts at phone sex by the end.” He cracks a joke and I chuckle.

“And after graduation?”

“Whatever you want to do, wherever you land, we’ll make it work.” He cups my face.

I decide to take the dive and ask the question I’ve been wondering about since we started hooking up again.

“And if I want to be in the same city as whatever team signs you?”

“Then we’re moving into an apartment before you can argue.” He smirks like he’s got it all figured out.

My heart soars. Teenage Emily would be over the moon at his answer; thinking about our grown up life had been one of my favorite daydream scenarios in high school. If I told her we were talking about moving in together in the near future, she’d probably jump on her bed all giddy and girly-like.

I have no argument, even now at his first proposal of this. Where I thought I’d be worried and afraid of next steps, it’s like my brain flipped a switch and I’m accepting of all these big moments to come in our future. I let my walls down, Mercer helped me to take them back down, and all I can see is clear skies for us.

“We’re really doing this. We’re fulfilling all the things we talked about when we were those little high schoolers making out in my basement.” I can’t help but blurt it out.



“Remember when we picked out our kid’s names?”

Did I remember it? I mooned over that memory often. Of course back then, we were just naive idiots who thought nothing could touch our love. But now ... those things we’d daydreamed about were real possibilities.

“Of course I do.” I pull his shirt up his back, eager to feel him inside me even though this conversation is just as intimate as sex.

“What if we get started on getting really, really good at practicing for them?”

That should not get me wet. The idea of having children with Mercer should not turn me on. Him muttering weird dirty talk like having a baby together should not get me hot and bothered.

But fuck ... it really, *really* does. Some day, this man is going to be the father of my children. I’ve known it in my bones for such a long time even if I didn’t want to admit it. We’d always been endgame. To hear him confirm that he wants all of that too, it’s damn sexy.

“That should not get me as wet as it does, but I’m soaked.” I tell him, guiding his hand down between my legs.

Mercer curses and starts shedding our clothes, our hands tangling in fabric between heady and passionate kisses. His fingers work me as soon as he slides my panties down, the thick digits curling up into my wetness until I’m whimpering for the release he’s about to destroy me with.

“Need to be inside you. *Now.*” He growls, reaching for a condom.

*Yes.* I say it in my head.

“People will realize we aren’t down there for the ball drop.” I whisper as he lines himself up.

“They know what we’re doing. Who cares? Soon enough, the whole world will know you’re mine forever. I want them all to know.”

The image of us on our wedding day flits into my mind as he says that. Right before our bodies connect, I can distinctly see a future us that doesn't care what the media or our hometown friends or anyone says about us. Our little unit of two will be the only thing that matters.

Now that we have it, I'm not letting it go for anything. Mercer and I will work through anything.

"We won't know when it's actually midnight." I realize, not that my hands on his ass urging him into me are about to stop on that account.

"Like I care? All I know is I'll be inside this perfect pussy when a new year starts. What better way to go into a fresh chapter than that?" Mercer's smirk is downright devilish.

I'm about to smack his naked pec for saying something so dirty, even if it's weirdly romantic, but he silences me when he drives in with one fluid thrust.

We stare at each other in wonder, the orgasm rolling down my spine before he even pulls out to thrust in for a second time.

That's how Mercer and I enter the New Year; making love like wild animals as the clock strikes twelve, insatiable for each other's bodies, minds, and hearts.



**T**he walk from the parking garage has been full of silence, some hiccuped sobs, and a few stops to randomly make out.

“Hate this,” I grumble, feeling the worst I’ve ever felt about flying back to Miami.

Honestly, I don’t think I’ve necessarily ever felt bad about leaving for school. Maybe that first time freshman year because I was still in the pits of heartbreak, but Emily and I had already been broken up, so I wasn’t leaving anything behind. In the years since then, I’ve felt nostalgia coming home and leaving because of Grandpa, but I’ve been all too happy to get back to college with my teammates and friends.

Today, though? I’m downright miserable. You would think Em is shipping me off to war with how distraught she is. But we’re a tad overdramatic because we just got together again. This winter break has been a whirlwind, to say the least, and leaving her so soon after we’ve reconciled makes it feel like the sun won’t shine for years to come.

This break has delivered in a way I never thought possible. I came home with a bunch of chips on my shoulder, weariness about the future, fear about Grandpa’s condition, and feeling like my life was about to move too fast for me to keep up with. Sure, I haven’t fixed all those things, they’re works in progress, but I do feel like I have a better grasp on them. My life and the chapters upcoming don’t feel so ominous and daunting, and maybe that’s because I have Emily by my side.

She makes me feel more grounded, and with her love, I almost feel invincible. If something goes awry, it'll be okay, because we can figure it out together.

“Me too,” she agrees, leaning her head onto my shoulder as we walk, and I press a kiss to her temple as I hoist my shoulder bag higher.

Em insisted on driving me to the airport at six a.m., even though I told her she should stay in bed and I'd call her when I landed. But we wanted every last possible second together before I went back to school, which is probably why her mom and dad didn't give her any grief about sleeping over at my place last night. We woke up at the crack of dawn this morning, and she again insisted to park in short-term so she could walk me all the way to security.

The automatic doors to the terminal slide open and we're greeted with the early morning hysteria and bustle of an airport and morning commuters. I've never minded the business of air travel, until right now, when I just want to be alone with my girl before I won't see her for months.

Setting my roller bag to the side, I bring her into my arms against the wall. This is as private as it's going to get, and I need a proper goodbye before I have to be without her for a while.

Holding her chin, I look into her eyes, now filled with tears, before I press a gentle kiss to her lips.

“I love you.” My words are clear as I kiss every part of her face, my hands banding tighter around her.

“I don't want you to go.” Her voice is clogged with emotion.

“I don't want to go. But we both know I have to. It's only for a few months, and then we have the rest of our lives.” I can't wait for that.

Emily lets out a watery laugh. “It seems so dramatic to be this emotional, but I just got you back. Even a few minutes is too long. Months? I'm going to go crazy.”

“That’s why we have cell phones. And plane tickets, whenever we can get away for even twenty-four hours.” I’ll do everything possible to see her as much as I can.

“Promise to buy the plane WiFi and text me the whole flight?” She’s adorable when she’s needy.

It’s the first time we’ll truly be apart as a couple, and the sadness clamping down on my heart makes it hard to breathe. I know we’ll try to see each other every few weeks, we’ll talk all the time, and that it’s only a few months, but I love her so fucking much it’s almost impossible to leave. I’m ready to be with her every day, just like we talked about when we were teens.

It’s coming, so soon I can taste it. I’m going to make a home for us, provide a life where she can do whatever she wants. If she wants seven master’s degrees and a PhD, I’m going to help make it possible in whatever way I can.

“Of course I will.” I pull her in by the sweatshirt strings, admiring my huge-ass Miami soccer clothing on her body. “You should have let me fuck you in this before I left. That memory is one I’d recall often.”

“Sign with a team and I’ll do you one better.” She leans up to whisper in my ear, “Jersey sex.”

My dick twitches with anticipation. “Ah, every athlete’s number one fantasy.”

We both pull back to look into each other’s eyes, our expressions growing serious.

“I love you, Mercer.” Her earnest expression is all I’ve ever wanted.

“You’re the love of my life, Em. It’s always been you. Will always be you. Fuck the distance, we’re forever. It’ll pass in a blink, then you’ll have me so much, you’ll get sick of me.”

“Not likely.” She snuggles into me and I cocoon my body around hers.

In this chaotic airport, we’re still in our little bubble. To me, this girl has always felt like home. One look at her and

I'm put at ease. Even when we're apart, I can just think of how she's mine again and a calm will settle over my body. It already has.

An announcement over the PA system has us moving a fraction, the spell broken.

"I should get through security and to my gate. Can't miss my flight." I feel the grimace as it passes over my face, because I kind of wish I could miss my flight.

It would give me a few more hours with her.

"Go." She swats at me, reading my mind. "I'll be okay. I mean, I won't be. But at least you're my boyfriend again and I can giddily daydream about that in my sadness."

"Stop on the way home and get yourself an extra sugary latte to make you feel better." I kiss her cheek, unable to stop touching her.

Our fingers won't unlace even as I pick up my bags again, rolling them toward the line snaking around the crowd control ropes. Emily holds on tighter, knowing we're nearing our last opportunity at physically holding each other for a while.

"It's only a few months," I repeat, trying to convince myself more than her.

"Only a few months." She nods.

"I love you. So fucking much." We're basically making out at the entrance of the security line, but I couldn't care less.

My mouth devours hers, savoring her taste like I'm going to draw it out for the next several weeks on my own tongue.

"I love you." Em breathes, sighing into me.

"Please keep moving," someone instructs me, and I know it's time.

Letting her hand go is one of the hardest things I think I've ever had to do in my life. This is how it's always been between us though, intense and all-consuming. It's why I want to be with her for the rest of my life. It's why she was my first, and why she'll be my last.

As I roll my bag through the line, I keep my eyes locked on her retreating form. Every few steps she looks back at me, smiling through tears, and mouths those three little words. I mouth them back and blow her a kiss, the corniness flowing through my veins.

I don't give a fuck, though; I'm a man in love.

All too soon, Emily is standing by the exit doors, hand over her heart like she's leaving it with me. Then she turns to go. Those gorgeous waves are the last I see of her, and I'm left feeling a little empty. Like a piece of me is missing.

Except this time, I know it'll be waiting for me whenever we're together again. This time, I don't have to question our status or commitment.

Emily Palmer is my forever girl. And we only have a little while longer to wait until we can start it all together.



# EPILOGUE

MERCER

## Two Years Later

Grandpa's arm is in mine as I walk him to the car, my steps careful as I avoid the icy patches on the pavement.

"You didn't have to come pick me up, the van would have driven me there," he remarks, but I noticed how wide his smile was when he saw me come through the doors.

"And miss the chance to embarrass you in front of the ladies who flirt with you here? Never," I razz him.

The old man rolls his eyes. "They do not. I simply have a lot more friends here than I used to outside this place."

Grandpa hikes a thumb behind him, motioning toward the assisted living facility he moved into a year ago. Even with my schooling and career, I've kept a close eye on Grandpa's health the past few years. When an aid coming into the home he'd always lived in wasn't enough anymore, I convinced him to let me move him into this state-of-the-art facility. He has his own apartment, can move freely as he likes, and has even taken up a poker league and shuffleboard team when it's nice enough out.

He might grumble about not liking it here, but I know he secretly loves it. There is nothing for him to maintain, he's taken care of well, and it takes a lot of worry off my brain knowing he's in good hands. Plus, I break him out often, whenever I can sneak up to Queenwood. We go out for milkshakes or on joy rides to the beach, and it allows us to have that close bond we've always shared.

"I can come back here tonight, I don't need to stay with you," Grandpa insists for the twelfth time since I told him the plan.

"It'll probably be late by the time the celebrations wrap up, and I don't want to be in a rush to get you back. I want you there with the family, and selfishly, I don't want to leave my own party."

Grandpa beams as we reach my car, looking at me like he couldn't be prouder. "Can't believe it. You're becoming a man right before my eyes."

"See, I thought I was a man the day you told me I should stop shaving my chest hair junior year of high school," I joke, helping him into the passenger seat.

"Always got a wisecrack, kid." He shakes his head but chuckles all the same.

Once we're both in and buckled, I start the drive to the Palmer farm. It wouldn't be Christmas season without spending time there, especially now that none of us kids work the tree farm all that much. Charlie comes back for about a week every season to work remote and help his parents out, but Em and I unfortunately don't have the time. It's a miracle our schedules lined up so that we could make it to New Jersey for the holiday this year.

Turns out, Emily didn't have to wait months for me when we went back to college.

I was signed as a free agent to the team in DC in February and moved up north the next week. The couple of credits I had left were allowed to be taken online, and seeing as the team wanted me to start the season with them, I couldn't say no. Not that I would want to. Getting picked up by the major league team in the city that my girlfriend went to school in? Yeah, that was pretty fucking perfect. It was like the universe knew we'd wasted so much time and deserved to be together finally.

The pro team kicked my ass into gear quick, conditioning me to the life of a career athlete faster than I probably should have gone. But in the end, it paid off. My knee recovered well, and in my third game as a rookie, I scored my first goal. It has been lightning in a bottle ever since. Last year, in my sophomore season, my team made it to the final round of the playoffs, narrowly missing the championship by a penalty kick. Even so, the critics hadn't pegged us to even make it that far, and it was a pleasant surprise our team meshed as well as

it does. This upcoming season has big expectations, but I am more than ready to play my heart out and live up to them.

While Emily worked as an RN for the last two years, she also decided to go back to school to get her master's degree. Long nights, lots of studying, tears, and a hell of a lot of other people's blood, and she is almost a nurse practitioner. She specialized in transplant medicine and is currently working at the hospital near our place as an NP in the liver transplant unit. She'll graduate this spring.

With my busy travel schedule and her chaotic school and clinical hours, the last two years haven't been particularly easy. There were weeks we didn't see each other.

That didn't really matter though; we are more committed and in love than ever. That's what happens when you let the bullshit go, move in with the girl you've always loved, and vow to make it work even on the tough days. I convinced Emily to move into a Georgetown apartment with me right after she graduated. Our second-floor, two-bedroom walkup is cozy and has all of the exposed brick charm my girl was looking for. On the bookshelves in our living room sit pictures of our friends and family, snaps of us from high school, and little items of memorabilia from our history. Our kitchen boasts an old-school tin sign from the tree farm back in the day. In between the pillows on our bed is a teddy bear I'd given her for our first Valentine's Day as a couple back in high school.

More than the comfort of our home, though, is that I get to end each and every day with her. I wake up to Emily sleeping beside me. Our home means that it's a place we share, where we are growing a life together, and that's what makes it so special. The commitment to each other, the vow to stay and fight, it's what makes me whole.

Soon, I hope she'll be saying some more vows with me.

"I don't know how they're still doing this, makes me tired just watching," Grandpa says as we pull up the lane to the Palmer Tree Farm.

Up on the hill sits the house I've known like the back of my hand since I was a kid. Now, it's the one I come home to for holidays with my second family and the girl I love.

"Em mentioned that her dad has been talking about retirement, but her mom simply can't see it yet. They have a lot of young kids helping out, just like we used to. I'm pretty sure Charlie yelled at his dad last week about carrying the trees, and there are now rules in place."

Both Charlie and I have offered to hire permanent crews for his parents to maintain the tree farm without straining themselves, but they declined. After all, I have all this money for what? The only thing I want to use it for is to take care of the people I love. Charlie is the same; he struck it big in his tech job and has more than enough to keep his parents comfortable.

They're too proud, though, and have been running the farm the same way for decades. I don't blame them for not wanting the change.

"It is beautiful, though." Grandpa sighs, and he sounds wistful.

Honestly, I feel the same. It's been a while since we were back in our hometown, but it feels right. Especially at Christmas. After all, it's how Emily and I found our way back to each other.

"They're here!" Emily's voice hits me before I see her, and then there she is, skipping down the steps in an oversized red sweater.

She looks like the embodiment of joy, and my heart hammers against my breastbone with how much I love her. It was only an hour that I was away from her, leaving her at the farm to go get Grandpa, and I missed her so terribly it's almost insane. We live together, have for the last two years, and I'll still never get my fill.

"How are ya, Em?" Grandpa chuckles as she gently pounces on him, helping him from the car and smacking a kiss on his cheek.

“It’s good to see you.” She smiles as they hug, and my heart vibrates it’s so happy.

“Driving your grandpa, or driving like a grandpa? Took you long enough.” Charlie appears at the top of the porch steps and I flick him off.

But then he’s walking to me, catching me up in a bro hug and we’re slapping each other on the back.

“Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas! Oh, all my favorite people in the same place!” Em’s mom comes out next, chirping over all of us like the mother hen she is.

We all migrate inside, talking loudly and animatedly, catching each other up on everything that’s been going on. Mr. Palmer meets us in the kitchen where a feast of appetizers has been spread, plus some of the delicious homemade cookies that Em and her mom make every year. Pulling out a stool for Grandpa, we all stand around and recap the past few months.

The last time we were all together, minus Grandpa, was at one of my games in the late summer. Charlie and his parents flew out to stay in town with us and attend a match, then hit a couple of our favorite spots with us. Other than that, though, we’ve all been so busy that we haven’t seen each other in months.

The entire time our family chats, my hand is on Em’s back. Or my fingers are laced with hers. Or her head is on my shoulder. Or our arms are wrapped around one another. I can’t not touch her when we’re around each other, even after all these years it’s like a natural instinct to feel her under my fingertips.

Throughout the conversation, my girl looks up at me with a glow in her eyes that translates to how radiantly happy she is at this moment. All her people at home for Christmas, and in love with me. I know it’s what she wished for when we were apart.

“Should we go read?” Charlie claps his hands like it’s time to finish up the noshing.

“You? Excited for the reading tradition?” Em pretends to be shocked.

He rolls his eyes. “I’m halfway through this series that’s really good.”

“Adulthood has changed you.” She pats her brother on the cheek as she passes him for the living room.

Mama Palmer instructs the kids to all go unwrap their books. She’s gotten me a sports biography, a sci-fi novel for Charlie though he opts for the book he’s brought with him, and a billionaire romance for Emily. I raise my eyebrows at the cover but know there will be some good inspiration for later when we’re forced to be quiet in her childhood room.

Grandpa pulls out his own paperback, having been briefed on the Palmer tradition, and then everyone takes a comfy spot on the couches and chairs.

Except I nudge Em, knowing we can’t settle in yet.

“There is another box under the tree for you.” I nod my head toward the massive tree in the corner.

“We only do books on Christmas Eve, you know that.” She smiles and wags her finger at me.

“Yeah, but I got special permission from your mom for this one.” And her dad but saying that will absolutely give away what I’m about to do.

Em tilts her head in curiosity before she rises from the couch to walk over to the tree. While her back is to me, I slip into position, waiting for her to start unwrapping the small box I placed there hours earlier.

A gasp behind me indicates that even though she knew this was coming, Mama Palmer can’t keep her cool. Em must hear it, because as she rights herself with the box in her hand, she turns to see what’s going on.

“Mom, what’s wrong?” Her free hand flies to her mouth when she sees me on one knee in front of her. “*Mercer ...*”

Smiling up at her, I reach up to take that hand away from her mouth and hold it.



“I’ve thought about this moment for a very long time. Mainly, I’ve thought of you in this moment. How I can make you happy. What I can do to make sure I fulfill every wish you have for the rest of your life. From the very start, you’ve always been the one for me, Emily Palmer. You grew up on this farm, among the Christmas trees, and this is where we fell back in love. I couldn’t think of a more perfect place to ask you to marry me than in this spot, with the people closest to us. And my God, do I want to marry you. Let me make you the happiest person on earth? Let me love you for the rest of our lives? Will you be my wife?”

My mouth is dry, my hands shake, my heart beats double time. And I’m not nervous about her answer. I’m just so exhilarated that this moment is finally happening.

Emily stares down at me with tears in her eyes, the wrapping paper still firmly on the ring box she’s holding. All the love we share shines in her expression, and I know I’m going to do everything in my power to make her happy forever.

“Yes. Of course, a thousand percent yes,” she whispers, a tear rolling down her cheek.

“Oh, yay!” her mother shouts, and I’m pretty sure she’s applauding.

I can’t really tell though, because I’m half-leaping up, and half being hauled up by Emily, so that our mouths can meet in a passionate, emotional kiss. Her lips move firmly against mine, the gesture sealing all the promises we’re making to each other at this moment.

“We’re getting married,” she squeals, breaking away as she looks up at me in wonder.

“You still have to unwrap your ring.” I chuckle, not letting her do just that with how tight I’m holding her.

Emily brings the box up between us, and together, we work to take the paper off and pry open the lid.

“Oh, Mercer ...” She breathes, taking in the diamond glinting in the velvet of the box.

The ring is simple, a rose gold band with a big oval diamond set on it. It's exactly what I thought Emily would like, but of course confirmed with her mother before I purchased it.

Sliding it on her left hand, I hear a choked little sob come from her, and then we're kissing again.

"Stop making out now," Charlie jokes.

"We'll have to go find some mistletoe away from everyone." Em wiggles her eyebrows.

"I may be able to make that happen." While I'd been excited to celebrate with our family, I am kind of regretting that now.

I wanted to go get naked with my fiancée and worship her body with my ring on her finger.

"This is better than anything Santa could have delivered down the chimney." She sighs dreamily, the two of us not having let go of each other yet.

Looking at her, the only girl I've ever loved, I nod. "I couldn't agree more."

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author of romance novels such as *Fleeting* and *Love at First Fight*, Carrie Aarons writes books that are just as swoon-worthy as they are sarcastic. A former journalist, she prefers the love stories of her imagination, and the athleisure dress code, much better.

When she isn't writing, Carrie is busy bingeing reality TV, having a love/hate relationship with cardio, and trying not to burn dinner. She lives in the suburbs of New Jersey with her husband, two children and ninety-pound rescue pup.

Please join her readers group, [Carrie's Charmers](#), to get the latest on new books, exclusive excerpts and fun giveaways.

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